

**We Warred Over Art:**  
**Pandemonium at *Le Sacre du Printemps***

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## Introduction

Standing in her box, her tiara askew, the old comtesse de Pourtalès brandished her fan and cried red-faced: ‘This is the first time in sixty years that anyone has dared make fun of me!’ The worthy lady was sincere; she thought it was a hoax.  
— Jean Cocteau<sup>1</sup>

On the evening of May 29, 1913, in the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris, the Ballets Russes’ premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, inspired magnificent scandal. The ballet, translated into English as *The Rite of Spring*, depicted a Russian pagan ritual of human sacrifice. It completely departed from the expectations of twentieth-century French viewers, leading quite literally to a riot in the theater.<sup>2</sup> Scholars including Thomas Kelly, Theodore Ziolkowski, Lynn Garafola, and Alexander Schouvaloff have discussed the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* extensively in terms of music and dance history, and yet, despite its commonalities with modern art of the period, it has not been discussed in terms of an art historical context. As the primary liaison between French and Russian artistic spheres, Sergei Diaghilev possessed the responsibility of presenting Russian culture in a manner that appealed to French audiences. In actuality, contemporary Russian art was quite complex in nature; a wave of Realist artists combatted the Westernized style of the Imperial Academy while yet another group of nationalist artists drew from French fauves to convey the natural beauty of their nation. Yet, up until 1913, Diaghilev’s presentation of Russian art conveyed a much simpler story- the works he

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le coq et l’arlequin* (Paris: Editions de la sirène, 1918; rpt., Paris: Stock, 1979), 87-96. Quoted in Thomas Kelly, *First Nights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 326.

<sup>2</sup> In actuality, the French title aligns more closely with a ritual associated with the coronation of a monarch or the consecration of a bishop (Kelly, 258).

featured adhered to early twentieth-century French taste with beloved classical ballet styles and glorification of Orientalist ideals. As a result, the production of *The Rite of Spring*, which presented an unforeseen portrayal of Russian folk culture, challenged Parisian viewers' preconceived notions of their own artistic tradition and their sense of national identity.

Born to a wealthy family in Russia in 1872, Sergei Diaghilev studied law and music in St Petersburg before shifting his interest to the visual arts in the mid-1890s.<sup>3</sup> He rose to prominence as an art critic, founding the *Mir Iskusstva* (*World of Art*) society and acting as editor in chief of its associated journal. Diaghilev used this society, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter I, to encourage the elevation of Russian art and challenge the existing trend of Realist painting.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, another body of Russian nationalist artists, who drew from folk art to celebrate Russia's rich history, grew in popularity and became heavily featured in the magazine. This group blended an old Russian style with that of the emerging French fauves. Diaghilev's eye for emerging artistic trends quickly caught the attention of the Director of the Imperial Theaters, Prince Sergei Mikhailovich Volkonsky, who made him a special assistant in 1899. In this role, Diaghilev staged Léo Delibes' ballet *Sylvia*. Although the project never came to completion, it served as Diaghilev's first experience uniting artists to collaborate in the making of a ballet. Following the Russian Revolution in 1905, Diaghilev set his sights on Paris. French art appreciators had little familiarity with Russian works. Indeed, even today, scholarly writings devoted to the contents of *The World of Art* are scarce: most notable are novels by Janet Kennedy and John E. Bowlt, completed in 1977 and 1979, respectively. Neither

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

of these is solely devoted to the Russian journal, but rather place it within a broader context of Russian art. Thus, the majority of their knowledge stemmed from Diaghilev's exhibition of a massive collection of Russian artists in 1906 and a Russian concert series in 1907. These projects held a crucial role in amassing his expansive audience of wealthy supporters who would follow him two years later for the unofficial debut of his ballet company. This factor may explain Diaghilev's choice to portray Russian artists as group heavily invested in imitating the styles of their French predecessors.<sup>5</sup> The works presented adhered to an impressionistic style to capture scenes of the fanciful and frivolous. Diaghilev kept the Russian nationalist aesthetic in relative obscurity among Westerners, perhaps recognizing controversial undertones embedded within the style.

Diaghilev continued this process of bringing Russian art to France under the auspices of the Ballets Russes. With this company, Diaghilev assembled dozens of innovative artists, choreographers, and composers with the common goal of creating a vast repertoire of avant-garde ballets. W. A. Propert, author of *The Russian Ballet in Western Europe 1909-1920*, described the company saying, "We saw the ballet for the first time breaking away from all traditions and expressing itself firmly and fully in a language entirely of its own invention."<sup>6</sup> By infusing the artistic styles Diaghilev admired in French and Russian paintings into his balletic work, he quickly acquired a reputation for producing cutting edge artistic advances with each performance of The Ballets Russes. These individual ballets worked together as a larger cohesive unit to project Diaghilev's overarching artistic aim of cultivating a distinct Russian identity. The

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>6</sup> W. A. Propert, *The Russian Ballet in Western Europe 1909-1920* (London, 1921), 17. Quoted in Alexander Schouvaloff, *The Art of Ballets Russes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 62.

foundation of this process began with the premiere of his first original ballet, *Schéhérazade*, in 1910 at the Opéra Garnier de Paris (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> The ballet tantalized viewers with a preferred French Orientalist aesthetic, which I will define more precisely in Chapter II, to expose the audience to the wonders of an exotic foreign culture. This outstandingly popular ballet emulated the styles of respected French painters like Jean-Léon Gérôme and Gustave Moreau. *Firebird* premiered shortly after, maintaining the Orientalist oeuvre to depict a Russian folk story. Diaghilev's application of this genre, which was typically associated with Eastern European territories, to a Russian storyline encouraged French viewers to identify his homeland with the same wonderment and lust as territories like Egypt and Turkey, regions typically subjected to Orientalist agendas. Thus, the Ballets Russes presented Russia as another foreign and distinct culture upon which Parisians could feast their eyes.

As a result, French theatergoers did not anticipate the stylistic change that occurred in *The Rite of Spring*. The 1913 premiere of *The Rite of Spring* portrayed the Russian 'Orient' in a very different manner. Diaghilev's new depiction of Russia attempted to align this ballet with the Russian nationalist aesthetic previously hidden from French viewership. The ballet tied into traditional Russian folk art, and more specifically, Roerich's larger collection of art that glorified Russia's ancient past. However, French ballet-goers' unfamiliarity with the style led them to misidentify the nod to Russian folk aspects. Instead, they only recognized the more familiar, although still generally disrespected style, of French *fauves*. To add to the shock of this change of aesthetic, on the evening of the premiere, Diaghilev placed the ballet back to back with

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<sup>7</sup> Schouvaloff, 62.

*Les Sylphides*. As one of the Ballets Russes' most traditional works, *Les Sylphides* epitomized the classical balletic style (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> Diaghilev primed his audience by opening the show with ballerinas in traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century long tutus waltzing to the delicate melodies of Frédéric Chopin before Alexandre Benois' backdrop of an elegant Romanticized French castle (Fig. 3). Following intermission, Diaghilev confronted his audience members with an entirely new look in *The Rite of Spring* (Fig. 4). The juxtaposition of the traditional with the avant-garde stunned viewers: "It was not the *Sacre*, but the *Massacre du printemps*," screamed Gustave de Pawalowski in his review for *Comoedia*.<sup>9</sup> Critics repeatedly ascribed these vehement reactions to the ugliness of the music and choreography. For example, Adolphe Boschot, wrote in *Echo de Paris*, "they repeat the same gesture a hundred times: they stamp in place, they stamp, they stamp, they stamp, and they stamp..."<sup>10</sup> Diaghilev's implementation of Nikolai Roerich's abstract landscapes and costumes, Vaslav Nijinsky's modern choreography, and Igor Stravinsky's aggressive musical score provided an entirely new visual and auditory vocabulary that did away with both the Romanticized classical style and the glamorized portrayal of the 'Orient' seen in Diaghilev's early ballets. This transformation led French? viewers to perceive Russia in an entirely new way. This was not an Eastern region upon which French viewers could lightheartedly layer their fantasies of an exotic 'other' world. Rather, *The Rite of Spring* placed Russia on the stage in a form quite

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<sup>8</sup> It premiered with the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in 1909. This ballet was closely based off of *Chopiniana*, choreographed by Fokine in 189

<sup>9</sup> Gustave de Pawalowski, Lousi Vuillemin, Louis Schneider, "At the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: 'Le Sacre du Printemps,' ballet in two acts, by M. Igor Stravinsky," *Comoedia*, May 31, 1913. Found in Kelly, 309.

<sup>10</sup> Adolphe Boschot, "Le 'Sacre du printemps': Ballet de MM. Roerich, Stravinsky, et Nijinsky," *Echo de Paris*, May 30, 1913. Quoted in Kelly, 305.

independent of Oriental ideals, and quite in line with those of what would later be termed ‘Primitivism.’<sup>11</sup>

In Chapter III, I will illuminate what the French perceived as a ‘primitive’ aesthetic in *The Rite of Spring*. The multidisciplinary nature of ballet allowed Diaghilev to apply this abstracted artistic style through several media at once. Jean Cocteau remarked of the ballet, “*The Rite of Spring* is still a ‘fauve’ work, but an *organized* ‘fauve’ work. Gauguin and Matisse bow before it.”<sup>12</sup> The work of these Russian nationalist artists aligned with rising French artistic exploration of cultures understood as ‘savage’ or ‘uncivilized.’ Roerich, in particular, seemed to adhere to this model in his desire to capture a simplistic, untouched Russian society. The ballet reverted to a pagan prehistoric culture, before the corruption of Westernization or industrialization. The ‘primitive’ style communicated The Ballets Russes’ shared sentiment among Russian artists of a pride for the artistic advances of their nation, and more importantly, for the non-Western routes of that artistry. On the evening of the premiere, *The Rite of Spring* marked a particularly important “birth” for Sergei Diaghilev and his fellow artist: through ‘primitive’ elements, the ballet established Russia’s stature as the motherland not only of ballet, but also of artistic innovation as a whole.

During a period in which France faced increasing challenges to their political stability worldwide, this expression of Russian nationalism could not be taken lightly. In the year prior to World War I, France relied on the security of their relationship with Russia, feeling particularly vulnerable beside Germany, as they became an increasing

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<sup>11</sup> While using the term ‘primitive’ to describe cultures outside of Western European tradition is now recognized as degrading, the style intended to employ a raw, underdeveloped appearance modeled off of ethnographic objects, particularly from Africa.

<sup>12</sup> Cocteau. Quoted in Kelly, 324.

threat. Up to this point, artistic commissions within Russia reflected a positive relationship with France. Diaghilev, in particular, made major contributions to establish the shared politico-artistic interests of the two nations, first through his 1906 and 1907 art and music exhibitions and later brought to a pinnacle with the successful development of the Ballets Russes. From 1909 to 1913, Diaghilev brought together a community of French and Russian political diplomats, the Parisian elite, and a number of aesthetes to enjoy the unification of French and Russian art through the medium of ballet. Yet, the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* threatened this relationship. This direct assault on the French political ideals, instilled within the nation as early as the Revolution of 1789, unsettled the upper class Parisian audience members, and ultimately brought into question their political relationship with Russia. Their nationalism and respect for French art as the ultimate standard of good taste led them to perceive *The Rite of Spring's* denunciation of these ideals in favor of a Russian alternative as utterly absurd.

Yet, the innovative nature of The Ballets Russes also attracted an array of theatergoers who admired Diaghilev's commitment to the advancement of artistic style. As such, many people supported The Ballets Russes for its fearless commitment to artistic innovation, regardless of the interwoven political implications. This intermingling of contrasting tastes could only result in conflict during such a politically and artistically controversial ballet. In fact, Jean Cocteau recounted,

All the material needed for a scandal is assembled there; a fashionable audience, low-cut dresses, tricked out in pearls, egret and ostrich feathers; and side by side with tails and tulle, the suits, headbands, showy rags of that race of esthetes who acclaim, right or wrong, anything that is new because of their hatred of the boxes (whose incompetent acclamations are more intolerable than the sincere hisses of the former).... And if I don't go into detail, it is only that I would have to point

out a thousand details of snobbism, super-snobbism, anti-snobbism, that would need a chapter to themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Many critics attribute the drastic response to the intermingling of Parisian elites with Slavic, Jewish, and other foreign notables within the audience. These attendants' level of 'sophistication' did not always correspond with that of their Parisian counterparts, nor did their artistic tastes. Rather, critics complained of the tourists, calling them "knot headed foreigners... who flocked to the Ballets Russes and other 'cosmopolitan spectacles' during the *Grand Saison de Paris*."<sup>14</sup> Garafola draws the greatest distinction between the groups in their varying reasons for choosing to attend the ballet. She explains, "the keynote of the connoisseur is disinterested appreciation and taste; that of the consumer 'good value.' The first seeks beauty; the second judges quality by rarity and price."<sup>15</sup> Yet Diaghilev embraced the diversity of his crowd and even welcomed their rowdy behavior, finding amusement in inciting a scandal.<sup>16</sup>

*The Rite of Spring* achieved its fame from the violent uproar it inspired. The socio-political artistic issues enwrapped in *The Rite of Spring* stunned viewers and lead to an uproar of historic proportions. As Jean Cocteau reported, "The audience played the role it had to play; it immediately rebelled. It laughed, scoffed, whistled, cat-called [...]. The uproar degenerated into a free-for-all."<sup>17</sup> The verbal barbs turned physically violent;<sup>18</sup> Carl Van Vechten recalled:

Cat-calls and hisses succeeded the playing of the first few bars, and then ensued a battery of screams, countered by a foil of applause. We warred over art (some of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Quoted in Kelly, 325.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Garafola, 298.

<sup>16</sup> Garafola, 298.

<sup>17</sup> Cocteau. Quoted in Kelly, 326.

<sup>18</sup> S. L. Grigoriev, *The Diaghilev Ballet, 1909-1929*, trans. Vera Bowen (London: Constable, 1953), 83-84. Quoted in Kelly, 318.

us thought it was and some thought it wasn't) [...] Some forty of the protestants were forced out of the theater, but that did not quell the disturbance.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike previous ballets, *The Rite of Spring* was not intended to please its audience. Gustave de Pawlowski, bemoaned in *Comoedia*, “An artist must, I repeat, a bit like the Romantics, always offer beauty as well as ugliness.” Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Roerich offered no reprieve for their viewers during the entire ballet. For a group of viewers unaccustomed to the ‘primitive’ themes that The Ballets Russes seemed to vehemently employ, the full half-hour performance became overwhelming and intolerable. The French elite attending the ballet that evening could not respect this work as ballet as they knew it. They expected ballets, even those depicting pagan lore, to adhere to specific trends and traditions as dictated by French arbiters of taste. This removal of “Frenchness” created the strongest point of contention for audience members at the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*. The Ballets Russes’ active dismissal of French artistic beauty in favor of ‘primitive’ earthiness horrified viewers, both as an insult to France’s artistic prowess and as an indication of more serious political unrest. Indeed, screams of protest ensued at *The Rite of Spring*. Ultimately, this response created a precedent for Diaghilev that he would employ in future ballets, making specific choices on the inclusion or exclusion of certain artistic styles in order to confront audiences with complex issues of self-identity.

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Van Vechten, *Music and Bad Manners* (New York, 1916), 470. Quoted in Kelly, 323.

## Chapter II. The World of [Russian] Art

The artistic foundations for the ‘Eurasian’ identity apparent in *The Rite of Spring* emerged from a Russian aesthetic developed by the society known as *Mir Iskusstva* (*The World of Art*). Established in December of 1899 in Saint Petersburg by Diaghilev, Alexandre Benois, and Léon Bakst, the group strove to cultivate a community of Russian artists on par with their European counterparts.<sup>20</sup> The cultural club and its associated journal brought together artists, poets, musicians, and critics in a manner that would later be replicated by The Ballets Russes. Diaghilev wrote to Benois before the formation of the journal:

You already know from Kostia [Somov] that I am full of projects, each one more grandiose than the next. Now I am projecting the journal, in which I intend to unite all our artistic life, that is in the illustrations to give a place to genuine painting, in the articles to state openly what I think, moreover in the name of the journal to organize a series of yearly exhibitions, finally to attach to the journal the new branch of applied arts which has been developing in Moscow and Finland; in a word I see the future through a magnifying glass.<sup>21</sup>

The group utilized exhibitions, journal publications, and communication with Western European artists to bring leading French trends into Russia. In addition, they supported the exploration of Russian ancient history to nurture a nationalist style. The style featured in *The Rite of Spring* demonstrates significant similarities to the folk art-inspired designs advocated in *The World of Art*. Benois noted in his memoirs:

I consider that by the ‘World of Art’ we should understand not this, that or the other in isolation, but everything together, or rather, a kind of collective which lived its own distinctive life, which had its own interests and aims, which tried to

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<sup>20</sup> John E. Bowlte, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the “World of Art” Group*, (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1979), 10.

<sup>21</sup> A. N. Benua, *Vozniknovenie ‘Mira iskusstva’* (Leningrad, 1928), 21-22. Quoted in Janet Kennedy, *The “Mir Iskusstva” Group and Russian Art 1898-1912* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977), 17.

influence society in various ways and to awaken in society the desired response to art...<sup>22</sup>

While *The World of Art* may be viewed, then, as shaping the specific Russian aesthetic and stylistic precursors for *The Rite of Spring*, the French audience had no prior exposure to the art and artists featured in *The World of Art*; even the large exhibition that Diaghilev had organized in Paris in 1906 presented Russian artists who emulated the French styles, reflective of the first phase of *The World of Art*, rather than the anti-industrial aesthetic the group promoted later in the decade that informed *The Rite of Spring*. As a result, Parisians knew little of this alternative nationalistic viewpoint, and on the night of the ballet, they were completely taken aback by this wholly unanticipated Russian style.

The shift between French-inspired and specifically pro-Russian art that occurred in *The World of Art* over the first decade of the twentieth century reflected the evolving political and artistic interests shared by Russia and France. During the 1880s, the two nations had developed a positive diplomatic relationship backed by a shared artistic culture. Throughout the following two decades, Russian artists generally looked to France to identify emerging trends. Cofounder of the Moscow Art Theater, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko commented that merchants, too, shifted their interests from the nationalist ‘Old Russian’ style toward Western trends in the works they patronized in order to flaunt “their striving for civilization and culture.”<sup>23</sup> This politico-artistic partnership became solidified in 1892 with the official formation of the Franco-Russian Alliance, which relieved France from the diplomatic isolation they had experienced since the Franco-Prussian War. Major artistic and architectural commissions commemorated

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<sup>22</sup> Alexandre Benois: *Vozniknovenie Mira iskusstva*, Leningrad, 1928, 6. Quoted in Bowlte, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Garafola, 150.

this political union, including the construction of the Pont Alexandre III over the Seine in 1896 (Fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> For this project, Tsar Nicholas II celebrated the union formed by his father with the French Third Republic by commissioning a bridge designed in a style that embodied the French *École des Beaux-Arts* to match the adjacent Grand and Petit Palais, which were also being constructed at this time. The design combined neoclassical architectural elements with Art-Nouveau lamps to illuminate the series of gilded statues of nymphs and cherubs. Recognized as the most opulent bridge over the Seine, the Pont Alexandre III celebrated France and Russia's diplomatic bond while also establishing Paris as the quintessential center of artistic taste.

The degree to which the Russians admired the artists of the *École des Beaux-Arts* was reflected in works produced at the Imperial Academy of Art in Saint Petersburg, where painters and sculptors tended to emulate the French style. This 'national art' created under the influence of the French provoked an extremist group of artists known as the Wanderers (*peredvizhniki*). Since 1863—coincidentally, the same year that Manet emerged at the Salon des Refusés as a precursor to later modernist trends—the Wanderers had been making efforts to combat the Imperial style. Rising in opposition to the Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, they demanded to have free choice of subject matter and other stipulations.<sup>25</sup> When the Academy ignored these requests, they rose up to create an exhibition of Realist works that presented Russia as it truly appeared rather than as an “idyllic Grecian Arcadia.”<sup>26</sup> They held Lev Tolstoi's belief that “Great works of art are only great because they are accessible and comprehensible to

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<sup>24</sup> Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 160.

<sup>25</sup> Bowlte, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Bowlte, 16.

everyone.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, however, the resulting artworks lacked the appeal of their European Realist counterparts of the mid-nineteenth century; a London art critic commented in 1899 that the group was “absolutely devoid of any artistic talent.”<sup>28</sup> Diaghilev and his cofounders shared this opinion, as evidenced by their choice to publish this exact statement in their fifth art chronicle of *The World of Art*. Artists like Ivan Kramskoi’s excessive concern with taking a Realist approach to painting often meant the final product lacked individual artistry or psychological depth.<sup>29</sup>

*The World of Art* sought to combat the negative image of Russian art that had resulted from the Wanderer’s movement by cultivating a newfound appreciation within Russia of the French style that corresponded more closely with the desires of the Imperial Academy. In fact, the styles Diaghilev featured embraced theatricality rather than reality. The assembly of artists in the society of *The World of Art* supported this goal with annual art exhibitions starting in 1897 as well as organized lectures and numerous journal publications.<sup>30</sup> The group called for “self-education” and subscribed to international magazines to study the latest art trends, literary works, and musical arrangements. The 1899 exhibition included works by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Gustave Moreau, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and many more.<sup>31</sup> By featuring artists of international acclaim, *The World of Art* successfully allowed Diaghilev to accelerate the development of Russian art to equal that seen in France. Unlike the somber tone of the Wanderers, *The World of Art* sought out themes of “youthful enthusiasm and juvenile

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<sup>27</sup> L. Tolstoi, “Chto takoe iskusstvo?” (1897-1898) in N. Rodionov (ed.) *L. N. Tolstoi. Polnoe sobranie schienenii*, Moscow, 1951, Vol. 30, paraphrase of 108-110. Quoted in Bowlte, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Report in the London newspaper *The Standard*, January 17, 1899. Quoted in *Mir Iskusstva*, 1899, No. 5, Art Chronicle, 41. Quoted in Bowlte, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Howlt, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Garafola, ix.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, 18.

delinquency, of homosexual passion and macabre excess, of studious intellectuality and uproarious practical jokes.”<sup>32</sup> Bakst’s personal interest lay in ancient Greece, while Benois’ preferred style drew from the French Rococo. Both artists manipulated the styles to capture the spontaneous and the sensuous, and overall, the group evoked an idealist, uplifting tone.

In 1905, *The World of Art* shifted focus. At the height of the Russian Revolution, the magazine veered away from modern French trends and turned instead to a Russian folkloric perspective. Mstislav Valerianovich Dobuzhinskii, who contributed to *The World of Art*, expressed, “At the beginning of a great renewal of our country it is essential for artists to speak out. In the building of a new life they ought to participate not only as citizens: they ought to contribute their mite as artists also.”<sup>33</sup> Emphasis on peasant crafts acted as a part of a larger artistic movement that celebrated nationalist pride in Russia. Landscapes also became one of the popular genres featured in *The World of Art*, as they captured the raw beauty of Russian soil. Images like Ivan Bilibin’s *Tale of The Golden Cockrel*, based off of the poem by Alexander Pushkin, meanwhile, revealed an interest in an almost medieval style of painting to capture the essence of Russian fairy tales (Fig. 6).<sup>34</sup> As artists reverted to Russian folklore, they searched for an artistic style that emulated the same raw, under-cultivated ideas. They employed an overall flattening of the picture plane, un-naturalistic depictions of space, thick outlines, and bold blocks of color. It was at this same time that Fauvism achieved great popularity in Russia for its “flattening of space, anomalies of perspective, and violent colors that evoke the

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<sup>32</sup> Bowlte, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Mstislav Valerianovich Dobuzhinskii, “Voice of the Artist.” Quoted in Kennedy, 46.

<sup>34</sup> Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov later composed an opera based on Pushkin’s fairy tale in 1907.

traditional Russian artistic patrimony.”<sup>35</sup> Many artists including Roerich as well as Larionov, Gontcharova, Machkov, and Kontchalovski mastered the style;<sup>36</sup> in 1910, these artists even became identified as “our Russian Matisse.” Matisse himself, who secured significant patronage from the Russian art collector Sergei Shchukin, jovially admitted in an interview, “French artists must now come to learn in Russia.”<sup>37</sup>

Nikolai Roerich stood at the forefront of this nationalist movement, and eventually took on the role of president of the later iteration of *The World of Art* in 1910 after Diaghilev and Benois left for Paris. In his time with this magazine, he established himself as a renowned painter of the Russian past. Roerich’s art fell into a larger movement of Russian artists towards a fauve nationalist style. In 1912, Makovsky and Baron Nikolai Vranghel organized the August exhibition of One Hundred Years of French Painting in Saint Petersburg.<sup>38</sup> Here, they presented an array of French paintings that documented the development from David and Ingres to Cézanne and Gauguin. This progression corresponds perfectly with that seen with Diaghilev in *The Ballets Russes*. Roerich’s painted Russian landscapes, such as *Idols* (Fig. 7) from 1901, for instance, drew upon the style of his French counterparts to depict ideas of prehistoric ritual, depicting a pagan site with grey stones arranged in a circular pattern to frame massive carved wooden idols. In another painting entitled *Sorcerers* (Fig. 8), Roerich presents men dressed in the style he would later use in the costumes for *The Rite of Spring*. Three men convene around a small circle of stones, hunching over as they perform some sort of

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<sup>35</sup> Paris-Moscow, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Paris-Moscow, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Interview de Matisse au journal *Ranee Outro*, Moscou, 26 octobre 1911, cité in: “Matisse in Russia in the Autumn 1911” Burlington Magazine, Londres, mai 1975, 28. Quoted in Paris-Moscow, 28. Translation mine.

<sup>38</sup> Howlt, 119.

ritual. Wolf hides are draped over their bodies with their fearsome jaws resting atop the men's heads. Underneath the animal skins, the men wear large boots and thick white tunics decorated with red geometric designs. Their clothing and even their dance-like ritual tie in seamlessly with the designs Roerich would later create for *The Rite of Spring*. What of the content of these images? Is he referring to shamanistic traditions of northern/Siberian Russia?

While Roerich's designs played a part in a greater mission to fuse anthropology and art in *The World of Art* to preserve and celebrate Russian history, French viewers would not have recognized his lofty aims. *The World of Art* received a limited readership, particularly in France. The only significant exposure Parisians might have received to the Russian style celebrated in *The World of Art* came through Diaghilev's exhibitions in the years prior to the Ballets Russes. In these instances, Diaghilev's portrayal of Russian art to France created a different history than the one told by Roerich. In a letter to Benois, Diaghilev wrote, "The French will be foolish to refuse. I shall take care to show them the true Russia."<sup>39</sup> Yet, in spite of this claim, Diaghilev showed French viewers the version of Russia they wanted to see. Much like the Pont Alexandre III, the works he exhibited in Paris in 1906 allowed the French to perceive Russia as another nation under their control to further stabilize the nations' artistic-political relationship. He captured French viewers' interests with a collection of Romantic Russian paintings. They embodied the concept of "art for art's sake" and represented the extravagant and beautiful. For example, Bakst's 1902 painting *Super* (Fig. 9) depicted a seated woman in a stylish black gown and hat, holding a glass of champagne as she smiles charmingly out toward the viewer. Another

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<sup>39</sup> Paris-Moscou, Translation mine.

painting by Alexander Golovin, *A Spanish Woman in Green* (Fig. 10), completed between 1906 and 1907 features yet another fashionable woman, this time in a rose garden with the flowers adorning her hair and draped over her lap. *The Carousel* (Fig. 11), painted by Nikolai Sapunov, uses an impressionistic style to capture the sense of motion and excitement of a carnival. The thick strokes of bright blue, red, green, and gold bring the carousel ablaze with energy. Dispersed throughout the scene, the artist shows a variety of cheerful faces, musical entertainment, and fanciful outfits. Overall, these works, all of which Diaghilev presented in the years prior to the establishment of the Ballets Russes, projected a body of Russian art that was comfortable for French audiences. The works conformed to impressionist and post-impressionistic styles and depicted subjects of pleasure and frivolity, a Western European bourgeois lifestyle.

The appeal and subsequent popularity of Diaghilev's Russian exhibitions played an important role in helping him to amass a solid following in Paris to make his artistic project, the Ballets Russes, financially sustainable. With the help of Gabriel Astruc, a French journalist and major promoter of each of Diaghilev's projects, Diaghilev amassed a strong following of wealthy supporters, diplomats, and high public officials who appreciated his eye for artistic talent. By the time that he established the Ballets Russes his support was such that he was able to successfully redefine the art of ballet, which was historically under-respected in comparison to other art forms. Garafola explains, "Few works of distinction graced its repertory, and even fewer artists of stature deigned to compose for it."<sup>40</sup> Diaghilev managed to dismiss this stigma due to his prior success in his exhibitions and concert series. He believed ballet provided the ideal combination of

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<sup>40</sup> Garafola, 274.

the “three foundational elements” of “dance, music, and design” that worked in perfect harmony to create a whole artistic work.<sup>41</sup> His esteemed assembly of Russian artists from *World of Art* understood his vision and worked as a cohesive team to execute his goals and cater to the interests of their Parisian viewers.

According to Garafola, in 1909 the *saison russe* attracted “ambassadors, cabinet ministers, political hostesses, entire Russian legations, and even French President Clément-Armand Fallières, transforming Diaghilev’s events into gala assemblies of policymakers.”<sup>42</sup> According to an observer:

The *repetition generale* that inaugurated Diaghilev’s career as a ballet impresario resembled, “an official ceremony: something like a Russian return to Paris, a new tightening of the alliance. Only this time the Russians have come not with ships and sailors to conquer our sympathy, but with singers, dancers, and decorators to conquer our admiration. No will doubt that this was a politico-artistic manifestation of the highest importance.”<sup>43</sup>

Russian and French political interests became deeply intertwined with the artistic enterprise. Thus, the stylistic choices Diaghilev made with each ballet carried great weight in conveying a specific message to French viewers. Prior to 1913, the Ballets Russes preserved positivity between the two nations by following the precedent set at the Russian exhibitions. *Les Sylphides* fit French Romanticized ideals perfectly, and the implementation of Orientalism in ballets such as *Schéhérazade* and *Firebird* was innovative, while still complying to standards of French taste, as discussed in Chapter I. In contrast, the emergence of Russian folk influence challenged the same standards in manner a wholly unanticipated by the Parisian viewers. Diaghilev must have understood

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<sup>41</sup> Centre Pompidou, *Paris-moscou, 1900-1930*, 366.

<sup>42</sup> Garfola, 274.

<sup>43</sup> “Un Monsieur de l’Orchestre,” “La Soirée. La Saison russe au Châtelet,” *Figaro*, 20 May, 1909. P. 5. Quoted in Garafola, 275.

the political implications of his change in style, but he could not have anticipated the extreme sensation *The Rite of Spring* would incite.

In actuality, the ‘primitive’ aspects of *The Rite of Spring* played into a larger context of political unrest in France to substantiate the audience’s tumultuous reaction during the premiere. Diaghilev’s early ballets contained a general appeal to a variety of viewers. Garafola explains that Fokine’s ballets were designed with an ethnographic method that possessed an “implicit respect for human diversity and the multiplicity of cultural expression—the belief that in the best of all possible worlds pluralism would reign.”<sup>44</sup> Diaghilev’s early ballets, which featured the designs of Bakst and Benois, embodied the early ideals of *The World of Art*, harnessing an Imperialist style, but Roerich did not maintain this universal appeal in *The Rite of Spring*. In fact, he used the Parisian stage as an opportunity to present Russia in all its glory to a European viewership.<sup>45</sup> His explicit celebration of Russian identity in the ballet significantly offended viewers for reasons beyond aesthetic appeal. The suggestions of ‘savage,’ untamed society integral to the theme of the ballet went against French governmental ideology. The prehistoric population uninfluenced by civilization presented in *The Rite of Spring* seemed to parallel the ‘primitive’ societies France tried to conquer. In effect, the ballet challenged the French republican model being implemented across the world. Thus, while the westernization of Russian art demonstrated the extension of French culture to a global audience, the dramatization of pagan Russian ritual in *Le Sacre* signified the opposite.

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<sup>44</sup> Garafola, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

As the Ballets Russes became more established, Diaghilev became bolder with the artistic concepts he employed. With four years of successful ballet seasons behind him, Diaghilev willingly took a risk with *The Rite of Spring*. By celebrating a Russian culture, and a primitive one at that, the artists behind the production of *The Rite of Spring* appeared to challenge civilized French ideals. On a subconscious level, preexisting political concerns led the French audience to interpret the Slavic themes of the ballet as a direct insult to their nationality. Julia Kristeva wrote, “it cast doubt not only on the efficacy of the Republic, but on the power of the French nation itself, and gave rise to considerations of the ethnic inferiority of the French.”<sup>46</sup> Threatened by the implications of the Russian nationalist message inherent in the ballet, the outburst of the Parisian audience into a full-fledged riot seemed an appropriate rebellion. They fought in defense of their art and of their nation.

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<sup>46</sup> “L’écroulement de la France jette le doute non seulement sur l’efficacité de la République, mais sur la puissance de la nation française elle-même, et donne lieu à des considérations sur l’infériorité de l’ethnie française.” Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique, L’Avant-Garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974), trans. Hollis Clayson, 527.

## Chapter II: The Russian 'Orient'

According to Said:

Orientalism is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has help define Europe (or the West) as its constrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.

Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism.... Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident.” Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so

on....The third meaning of Orientalism... [is] as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.<sup>47</sup>

Diaghilev established The Ballets Russes as a respected ballet company at the forefront of artistic enterprises during his first few years in Paris. After the company's unofficial debut in 1909, he formally began this venture in 1910 with his first original ballet, *Schéhérazade*. The ballet followed the prologue of *One Thousand and One Nights*, a familiar Arabian tale for Westerners interested in Eastern European culture. This style satisfied the imaginations of viewers who wished to learn more about the exotic 'Orient.' Through an Orientalist style, Diaghilev brought French viewers a world of excitement and intrigue. According to Edward Said, who wrote the definitive text on the nineteenth-century European sensibility, Orientalism "identifies an amateur or professional enthusiasm for everything Asiatic, which was wonderfully synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the seminal."<sup>48</sup> Yet, this enthusiasm had little to do with the study of actual historic or modern culture of the East. Said continued to say, "a nineteenth-century Orientalist was therefore either a scholar or a gifted enthusiast, or both."<sup>49</sup> He suggests that most Europeans' understanding of the Orient did not develop from actual site visits. Rather, colonists and most other Europeans largely based their knowledge on reports in older texts, preferably referring to the classical period of the desired foreign society. In the event that scholars did travel to their location of interest, it was often, Said said, "with unshakable abstract maxims about the 'civilization' he had studied."<sup>50</sup> British historian V. G. Kiernan referred to this idealized version of history as

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<sup>47</sup> Said, 1-3.

<sup>48</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 51.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Said, 52.

“Europe’s collective daydream of the Orient.”<sup>51</sup> Diaghilev’s early ballets performed by the Ballets Russes played into this daydream, appealing to viewers’ desire for exotic and enticing presentations of Eastern European and Russian cultures.

In France, the Orientalist style enhanced viewer’s understanding of their superiority and elevated sophistication compared to the nations on display. The extreme popularity of this genre indicates the high level of French governmental action to express this sense of superiority through the conquering of territories. Orientalism acted as a means through which Europeans could designate specific cultures as ‘inferior.’ The mindset gave Europeans allowed for a cultural and racial chauvinism, a sense of control and national dominance that became further established through colonialism.<sup>52</sup> After the loss of the Franco-Prussian War, French colonialist efforts climaxed as a means to reassert the nation’s presence as a world power. This was echoed by the emergence of Social Darwinist views in the late 1870s. France invested much of their scientific research in the genetic components of racial ‘superiority.’ To demarcate French people within the ‘superior’ category, Prime Minister Jules Ferry called for free, compulsory, and secular education. The idea followed that with proper education came elevated value and thus power. The acquisition of numerous colonies in Africa and Indochina helped to further spread France’s political influence. Encouraging colonialism in a speech before the French Chamber of Deputies on March 28, 1884, he declared, “[We] have the duty to civilize the inferior races.... In our time nations are great only through the activity they

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<sup>51</sup> V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, and White Man in an Age of Empire* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), 131. Quoted in Said, 52.

<sup>52</sup> Donald A. Rosenthal, *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting 1800-1880* (Rochester, 1982), 8-9.

deploy.”<sup>53</sup> The French government aimed to teach the French language, eradicate chiefdoms, denounce the slave trade, and implement modern technology in colonies all as a means to glorify republicanism.<sup>54</sup> Artists’ illuminated this supposed lack of responsibility and reason amongst Eastern cultures as a means to highlight the more proper Enlightened values of France. In many ways, Orientalist works played a propagandistic role for the French nation, establishing the republican governmental design as more reasonable, logical, effective, and moral than its ‘Oriental’ counterpart. These images went beyond being purely Romanticized scenes of foreign luxury. They illustrated Said’s description of European expansion as an indicator of Europe’s centralized role as a culturally? “privileged center.”<sup>55</sup> They executed the agenda of French officials to clearly establish the elevated status of the Western captor over the conquered Easterners.

Diaghilev utilized the style of Orientalist artists to complement his French viewers’ political achievements and artistic taste while also enchanting them with a Romanticized style. With *Schéhérazade*, the Ballets Russes accomplished the goals of Orientalism through the ballet’s subject matter and its artistic execution. Garafola describes the ballet as a “pure Orientalist fantasy.”<sup>56</sup> The ballet portrayed a sultan who discovers the affair of his favorite concubine, Zobéide, with the Golden Slave and, in his jealous rage, orders the massacre of his entire harem.<sup>57</sup> The ballet closes with the tragic

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<sup>53</sup> Jules François Camille Ferry, "Speech Before the French Chamber of Deputies, March 28, 1884," *Discours et Opinions de Jules Ferry*, ed. Paul Robiquet (Paris: Armand Colin & Cie., 1897), -1. 5, pp. 199-201, 210-11, 215-18. Translated by Ruth Kleinman in Brooklyn College Core Four Sourcebook.

<sup>54</sup> Alice L. Conklin, "Colonialism And Human Rights, A Contradiction In Terms? The Case Of France And West Africa, 1895-1914." *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (1998): 419-442.

<sup>55</sup> Said, 117.

<sup>56</sup> Garafola, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Vaslav Nijinsky, who later choreographed *The Rite of Spring*, originated the role of the Golden Slave.

image of Zobéide begging for mercy as she lies at the feet of her master. In the throes of despair, Zobéide recognizes the unforgiving nature of her husband and stabs herself to death.<sup>58</sup> This story aligns with themes typical of Orientalism, which often dramatize the relationships between sultans and their many odalisques. The voyeuristic aspect of ballet allowed French viewers to sit comfortably in their boxed seats, behaving in a manner deemed ‘appropriate’ for respectable ladies and gentlemen, even though they likely lusted over the exotic characters’ sensuous stage performances. To design the ballet, Diaghilev brought together his two cofounders of *The World of Art* Alexandre Benois and Léon Bakst. For choreography and music, Diaghilev selected Mikhail Fokine to invent movements that complemented the Oriental melodies of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s 1888 score.

Just as with Orientalist painting, Sergei Diaghilev had to ensure his ballet appeared enticing without seeming vulgar. As Schouvaloff wrote, the ballet walked along a fine line between “exotic and the erotic, and preserved its Oriental Russianness from degenerating into kitsch.”<sup>59</sup> Bakst maintained the integrity of the ballet with the tactful implementation of the ‘Oriental’ style. His preparatory paintings for his costume designs provide insights into his artistic aims. A watercolor of the Sultan demonstrates his imaginative understanding of Arabian culture, based on other images he has studied, **not on his personal exposure** (Fig. 12).<sup>60</sup> In the image, the sultan wears lavish silk garments and an enormous crown adorned with tall golden plumes. The bright colors and unique patterns of each garment add to the luxuriant quality of his appearance. Russian critic,

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<sup>58</sup> Schouvaloff, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>60</sup> Delacroix had indeed gone to Algeria in the 1830s.

Tugendhold, described Bakst's costumes for *Schéhérazade* as "truly masterpieces; it is not just their detail, but their beauty, a special kind of beauty, refined, heady, sensual, such as we only find in Bakst."<sup>61</sup> The enhancement of vibrant, sumptuous fabrics used for costumes and sets, the exaggeration of passionate demonstrations of love, and the dramatization of expressions of violence made the Orientalist ballet even more exciting for audience members. The same sumptuous quality exudes from his other illustrations of *Zobéide and the Golden Slave* (Figs. 13, 14). Bakst packed his paintings for the sets of *Schéhérazade* with brilliant colors to evoke a sense of drama and exotic pleasure (Fig 15). In 1915, he wrote:

I have often noticed that in each color of the prism there exists a gradation which sometimes expresses frankness and chastity, sometimes sensuality and even bestiality, sometimes pride, sometimes despair. This can be felt and given over to the public by the effect one makes of the various shadings. This is what I tried to do in "Sheherazade." Against a lugubrious green I put a blue full of despair, paradoxical as it may seem. There are reds which assassinate and there are reds which are triumphal... The painter who knows how to make use of this, the director of the orchestra who can put with one movement of his baton all this in motion, without crossing them, ... can draw from the spectator the exact emotion he wants him to feel.<sup>62</sup>

For this reason, Bakst approached his designs with extreme precision in order to evoke exactly the proper sentiment from his viewers. Like many of his *World of Art* colleagues, Bakst developed a reputation for his sensitivity to the multitude of human responses to art.<sup>63</sup> His careful work led to absolute success for The Ballets Russes; French viewers raved over the Oriental design, and fashionable women rushed to acquire "Schéhérazade"

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<sup>61</sup> Y. Tugendhold, "Russkii balet v Parizhe" ("The Russian Ballet in Paris") in *Apollon*, No 8, St. Petersburg, May-June 1910. Quoted in Schouvaloff, 65.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Steven Mayer, "The Theatrical Designs of Léon Bakst," (New York: Columbia University, 1977), 182. Quoted in Garafola, 35.

<sup>63</sup> Bowlt, 216.

dresses, preferably made by Bakst himself. In *Le Figaro*, Robert Brussel wrote of the opening night performance:

Everything in this performance blends into a prodigious orgy of gleaming colors, rhythms and contrasting movements; and everything also dissolves into a harmonious beauty. M. Léon Bakst's décor is in itself a masterpiece, and every single one of his costumes is another; they would be enough to evoke what in other respects is evoked by the music and the rhythm of the movements and the groupings.<sup>64</sup>

The French viewers admired the ballet for its Orientalist implementation of an Arabian storyline, packed with wild love affairs and dramatic depictions of the foreign culture. While they had seen these cultures in the form of painting and literature, they had not witnessed it in a theatrical setting.<sup>65</sup> The application of this French artistic trend to the stage thrilled viewers as it combined shockingly erotic movements with vibrant and sexualized costumes. The audience members found themselves transported to a mystified land, where humans acted upon their instincts, whether violent, fear-ridden, sensual, or compassionate. The French elite embraced the ballet as a new venue through which they could find the same excitement they felt from viewing exotic painted representations of the East.

Both the viewers and the producers of the ballet understood that this depiction of the 'Orient' embodied a fantasy rather than a historical reality. A truly accurate depiction of the Orient, according to Fokine, would have been virtually impossible for these Russians to recreate. He admitted, "Nothing would have induced me to stage my ballet in the authentic Oriental style, for such an undertaking would have required a genuine

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Brussel, "La Saison Russe à l'Opéra" in *Le Figaro*, Paris, 6 June 1910, 6. Quoted in Schouvaloff, 65.

<sup>65</sup> Schouvaloff, 39.

Oriental orchestra.”<sup>66</sup> This comment indicates that the actual orchestral design adhered to an unrealistic Oriental style conceptualized by Rimsky-Korsakov who had not witnessed these cultures first-hand, but based his knowledge off of the compositions of his mentor, Mily Balakirov.<sup>67</sup> Fokine conceded, “The Orient,” as conceived by the French, was “based on authentic Arabian, Persian, and Hindu movements, [and] was still the Orient of the imagination. Dancers with bare feet, performing mostly with their arms and torsos, constituted a concept far removed from the Oriental or Orientalist? I’m getting confused with terminology ballet of the time.”<sup>68</sup> Yet, the composer and choreographer allowed suggestions of Russian folk elements to shine through in the music as well as the dancers’ movements. The artists behind the design of *Schéhérazade* idealized Arabian culture with the primary goal of appealing to their viewers. Fanciful depictions of foreign culture seemed highly accessible for Western audiences.

The instant popularity of the ballet suggests that it likely could have provided the ballet company high profits, had it continued to appear in every subsequent season.<sup>69</sup> Although The Ballets Russes did not perform *Schéhérazade* in every program, Diaghilev maintained an Orientalist style in many of his early works. *Firebird*, for example, implemented a similarly fantasized version of reality. The ballet premiered in the same season as *Schéhérazade*, but adapted the Eastern European style to a Russian folk story. The ballet follows the journey of Ivan Tsarevich, who discovers and captures the Firebird during his venture through the magical domain of a monster named Kostchei.<sup>70</sup> The

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<sup>66</sup> Michel Fokine, *Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, 154. Quoted in Schouvaloff, 63.

<sup>67</sup> Yastrebtsev, Vasily Vasilievich, *Reminiscences of Rimsky-Korsakov* (New York: [Columbia University Press](#), 1985), 37.

<sup>68</sup> Fokine, 154. Quoted in Schouvaloff, 63.

<sup>69</sup> Schovaloff, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Garfola, 29.

storyline, albeit Russian, lends itself to Oriental themes with continuing conflicts between tyranny and freedom, forbidden love and mystical influence. Again, Bakst conveyed this idea by employing designs that harkened back to *Schéhérazade*. As the costume artist and set designer for both ballets, he maintained a relative cohesion between the two works by enrobing his dancers in similar Oriental styles for each. Tamara Karsavina, who danced the role of the Firebird, wore an elaborate headdress, long golden braids, and a tutu of red feathers; large metal cuffs and several strings of pearls covered her wrists, ankles, upper arms, and neck (Fig. 16). Bakst's artistic drawings emphasized the Firebird's sexuality, exaggerating her figural form with heavy ornamentation at her narrow waist and triangular pieces of fabric billowing out in a full skirt (Fig. 17). Additionally, the diaphanous fabrics added a level of sensuality by subtly revealing the contours of her legs underneath. The illustration exaggerates her feminine form to further entice viewers. Overall, the design placed the *Firebird* in the same alluring light as the odalisques of *Shéhérazade*.

Despite the Russian storyline of *Firebird*, The Ballets Russes continued to appeal to the French zeal for “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, and intense energy” typically associated with Eastern European nations. Russia did not technically fall within the region understood as ‘Oriental;’ in fact, the Russian perception of the ‘Orient’ aligned with that of France.<sup>71</sup> Yet, Diaghilev willingly employed this artistic genre in his ballets, placing in the same light as countries like Turkey and Egypt. Garafola explained, “From the start, ‘Russianness’ defied neat categories; it was tinged with the Orientalism that Paris redefined as its common denominator.”<sup>72</sup> The French

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<sup>71</sup> Said, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Garafola, 16.

image of the Orient grew to encompass all nations that seemed foreign and unfamiliar. Ballet goers who enjoyed these Orientalist works successfully categorized Russia as what Garafola describes as “historically and ethnically non-Western.”<sup>73</sup> Diaghilev’s choice to portray these Russian tales in an Orientalist style may suggest his intentional and calculated appropriation of the popular style in order to make his otherwise foreign subject matter more familiar and therefore palpable to his viewers. As a new company, recently arriving in Paris from Russia, the Ballets Russes needed to establish their legitimacy and to assert their presence as a valuable contributing force in this city renowned for its world-class art. The Orientalist approach allowed the company to demonstrate their understanding of popular artistic trends and guarantee the approval of French viewers. The ‘Orient’ provided Europeans with an escape from the seriousness and responsibility of their domestic concerns. Lord Evelyn Baring Cromer, the English representative who suppressed the Egyptian nationalist rebellion of 1907, stated, “I content myself with noting the fact that somehow or other the Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European.”<sup>74</sup> It allowed for Europeans to apply a fantasized glamour to the cultures of uncharted territories.

Yet, Diaghilev chose to trade opulence and charm for a much less alluring depiction of ancient Russia in *The Rite of Spring*. Diaghilev seemed permanently interested in capturing the daring, rather than the safe, and the cutting edge, rather than the traditional. This inclination motivated him to depart from the ‘Oriental’ style upon which he built his company. Taking pride in his own nation and he knew that his unique Russian culture called for an equally distinctive artistic representation independent from

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2: 164. Quoted in Said, 39.

both ‘Western’ or ‘Eastern’ classifications. Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer’s consider Diaghilev’s aims for *The Rite of Spring* as a “search for Russian national identity..., a persistent, troubled quest that grew historically out of resistance both to the epoch of Tatar domination and to the forced Westernization of Russia by Peter the Great, and that posited Russian identity as one of mixed heritage: Eurasian.”<sup>75</sup> The problematic placement of Russian culture as neither fully Eastern nor Western but actually a conflation of the two, required the Ballets Russes to find a new artistic genre through which to properly capture their cultural heritage.

Having secured his Russian ballet company as a respected enterprise in France, Diaghilev proceeded to take bold measures in *The Rite of Spring*. He rejected the well-established Orientalization of Russia in favor of a more authentic portrayal of his homeland by turning to folk representations of Russian landscapes as inspiration. He discarded the richly Romanticized charm that embodied *Schéhérazade*, opting for its simplified counterpart. When *The Rite of Spring* appeared before audiences, French viewers expected The Ballets Russes to offer yet another performance containing over-the-top depictions of wild love affairs and enticing relationships. Instead, the company stunned their viewers with ritualistic demonstrations of religious devotion. Additionally, although audiences had witnessed acts of violence in prior ballets, the violence they observed in *The Rite of Spring* took on a much more horrifying nature. The sultan’s actions in *Schéhérazade* spurred from emotions of passionate fury and romantic heartache. In contrast, the female sacrifice in the final scene of *The Rite of Spring* seemed

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<sup>75</sup> Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer, *The Ballets Russes and Its World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 118.

purely savage and unsympathetic. As Maria Piltz danced to her death, the audience must have been overcome by the fear that motivated her thrashing movements.

The Ballets Russes majorly diverged from Orientalist ideals in this ballet. The effects of this transition were manifold. First, the native culture of Diaghilev and his Russian colleagues acquired a distinct identity from the Eastern European countries with which it had been previously grouped. Secondly, the artists relieved Russia from the political imperialistic implications of ‘Orientalism.’ By stripping away this Westernized style, the artists challenged previous suggestions of French supremacy over Russia. Thus, the Ballets Russes flagrantly combatted the Romanticism of Asia that existed prominently in the salons of the nineteenth century. Artistically, the producers of *The Rite of Spring* accomplished this by creating a ballet that represented the polar opposite of Orientalism. Tamara Karsavina identified this by observing, “Nijinsky declared his feud against Romanticism and bid adieu to the ‘beautiful.’”<sup>76</sup> The costumes, choreography, and music for the ballet were intentionally unappealing to cut ties from the frivolity of the Orient. Yet, for Parisians, this aesthetic embodied another artistic concept—‘primitivism.’ By celebrating a Russian culture, and an apparently ‘primitive’ one at that, the artists behind the production of *The Rite of Spring* appeared to challenge more than France’s understanding of ‘supremacy’ and ‘inferiority.’ The ballet questioned French ideals of civilized society. The audience took this extreme rejection of accepted French artistic style as a direct insult to their national identity, justifying the uproar that immediately ensued. In *Le Figaro*, Henri Quittard remarked, “*Firebird* and *Petrouchka*

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<sup>76</sup> Tamara Karsavina, *Theatre Street* (London, 1954), 236. Schouvaloff, 41.

both seem young and seductive works. Works with a future. But this one?...”<sup>77</sup> Quittard’s report for *Le Figaro* in response to the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* indicated a transformation in the Ballets Russes’ mission: In this new ballet, Diaghilev and his disciples veered away from predetermined Western constraints. They took on a nationalistic view of a distinctly “Eurasian, non-Western Russian national identity.”<sup>78</sup>

You set up the social history very well, but at the cost of not engaging the visual culture very much. Perhaps I feel this way because there are no figure numbers and no clear relationship between your text and images. So by the end of chapter one and 21 pages in, I’m left wanting some insightful (but it can also be brief) analysis and comparison of the material/visual culture you are calling into question.

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<sup>77</sup> Henri Quittard, “Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: Le Sacre du printemps: scenes of pagan Russia, in two acts, music by M. Igor Strawinsky: choreography by M. Nijinsky: sets and costumes by M. Roerich,” *Le Figaro*, May 31, 1913. Kelly, 307.

<sup>78</sup> Garfola and Baer, 120.

### Chapter III: Russia's 'Primitive' Roots

At the conclusion of a highly negative review of *The Rite of Spring* in *Echo de Paris*, Adolphe Boschot remarked, “Obviously, all this can be justified: what that is is prehistoric dance. The uglier and more deformed it is, the more prehistoric.”<sup>79</sup> Nikolai Roerich and Igor Stravinsky shared responsibility for conceptualizing *The Rite of Spring*'s ‘prehistoric’ tone (Fig. 18). The painter/anthropologist designed the visual complement to the musician’s innovative composition that effectively captured their ideal of pagan Russia. Diaghilev then added Vaslav Nijinsky to this team to create equally distinctive choreography. The aim was to present a ballet that would be, in every respect, distinctly foreign for its sophisticated French audience. The three artists’ achieved this goal, combining their challenging music, unprecedented choreography, and the ‘savagely’ painted sets and costumes to create a particularly shocking spectacle. The audience’s explosive reaction at the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* could not have been wholly unanticipated. However, as I will argue, extraneous issues also came into play that spurred the revolt beyond what even Diaghilev, Roerich, Stravinsky, or Nijinsky might have expected.

It is useful to situate *The Rite of Spring* within a wider view of modernist trends in French painting and sculpture, specifically those related to what would come to be in the mid-twentieth century, called “Primitivism.” Gill Perry has defined “primitive” as “Eurocentric” and “revealing a Western-centered view of an alien culture”<sup>80</sup>—a

<sup>79</sup> Adolphe Boschot, “Le Sacre du printemps’: Ballet de MM. Roerich, Stravinsky et Nijinsky,” *Echo de Paris*, May 30, 1913. Quoted in Kelly, 288.

<sup>80</sup> Gill Perry, *Primitivism and the ‘Modern,’* 5.

description that would seem at odds with a ballet produced by Russian artists to portray their own ancient culture. Nonetheless, particularly in light of reviews such as Boschot's that employ such heavy descriptions as "prehistoric," "ugly," and "deformed," it is informative to consider *The Rite of Spring's* music, choreography, sets, and costumes in the artistic legacy of key modern artists, including Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, whose paintings and sculptures had already incited no little controversy of their own among Paris audiences.

The Salon d'Automne of 1919 in the Grand Palais in Paris acted as the first exhibition of 'primitive' art, occurring six years after the Ballets Russes premiere, but artists and dealers were well versed in the aesthetic much earlier.<sup>81</sup> An interest in the 'primitive' developed in the eighteenth century, with exploration into Africa and Oceania. Collectors utilized "rarity cabinets" to display "cult objects and other savage utensils."<sup>82</sup> As ethnographic study grew in popularity throughout the nineteenth century, museums were formed across Europe to display "antiquities" found abroad (Fig. 19).<sup>83</sup> It is important to note, the artifacts in these museums were not considered works of art, but rather objects of interest to European explorers. Gradually, exhibits shifted focus to highlight particular pieces over others based on artistic value or expert craftsmanship without consideration of meaning.<sup>84</sup> The foundation for evaluation and appreciate of African objects began in these ethnographic museums. Viewers appreciated the works for their "rude" and "exaggerated" qualities, far from naturalistic representations taught

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 17.

previously in the Academy.<sup>85</sup> Researchers looked to these ‘savage’ works as a source to find the origins of art.

These interests became manifested in the works of European artists with the emergence of the *fauves* around 1904 or 1905.<sup>86</sup> Artists turned to African cultures in an effort to capture “the Romantic, emotional, intellectual, and subconscious” in its truest sense.<sup>87</sup> They were captivated by the cultures they deemed ‘savage’ and ‘child-like’ and were attracted to what Goldwater described as the “strangeness and curiosity of primitive craftsmen.”<sup>88</sup> The subject matter of their paintings often depicted large groups of figures in vivid natural landscapes. The human bodies became incorporated into their surroundings as an integral part of the landscape itself, as can be seen in Maurice de Vlaminck’s *Bathers* (Fig. 20) and Henri Matisse’s *Le Bonheur de Vivre* (Fig. 21). Yet, the artists aimed to induce a visceral response from viewers. Matisse explained, “one does not depict matter, but human emotion, a certain elevation of spirit which might come from no matter what spectacle.”<sup>89</sup> Large patches of pure colors, broad brushstrokes, and an avoidance of sophisticated artistic tools, particularly linear perspective, all contribute to the style of *fauve* works. They veered away from perfectly finished works and harmonious designs in favor of a more rudimentary appearance.

In the creation of *The Rite of Spring*, the Ballets Russes took advantage of this powerful association of the rudimentary style of ‘primitivism’ with ideals of purity and virtue to present Russia in the desired manner. In *The World of Art*, Diaghilev iterated his

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., xxii

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>89</sup> Henri Matisse, “Notes of a Painter,” trans. by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Henri Matisse* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1931), 35. Goldwater, 98.

belief that “art was a natural part of human life, and the primitive was more an artist than contemporary man because his senses were unclouded.”<sup>90</sup> The Ballets Russes’ use of a primitive aesthetic definitively indicates the artists’ promotion and glorification of their homeland in its original and natural state. When presenting their ballet in Paris, a city that acted as the arbiter of Western culture and sophistication, this Russian company sought to assert, and even defend, the artistic innovations of their native culture. To do this, however, required Diaghilev and his team of artists to venture away from the traditional nineteenth century Russian ballet style of the “symmetrical, international body which had been refined and reconstituted in Russia based on ideals imported from Western Europe” in exchange for an Asian alternative.<sup>91</sup> Other artists of this period supported this action. Russian ‘primitivist’ painter Alexander Shevchenko wrote in 1913, “We are called barbarians, Asians. Yes, we are Asia, and are proud of this, because ‘Asia is the cradle of all nations,’ a good half of our blood is Tatar, and we hail the East to come, the source and cradle of all culture, of all arts.”<sup>92</sup> Primitivism seemed to embody perfectly the aim of Diaghilev for *The Rite of Spring*. The artistic style brought honor to a non-Western, uncivilized aesthetic. Further, by emphasizing the ‘degradation’ of culture, ‘primitive’ style symbolized the origin of humanity and of artistic interest. Thus, by applying this style to Russia, the Ballets Russes identified the roots of modern artistic beauty in their own soil.

Nikolai Roerich and Igor Stravinsky shared responsibility for conceptualizing the ‘prehistoric’ tone intended for *The Rite of Spring*. The painter/anthropologist designed the

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<sup>90</sup> Kennedy, 367.

<sup>91</sup> Garafola and Baer, 119.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

visual complement to the musician's innovative composition that effectively captured their ideal of pagan Russia. Sergei Diaghilev added Vaslav Nijinsky to this team to create equally distinctive choreography that would allow the ballet to take on a completely foreign quality for its sophisticated French audience. The music, choreography, sets, and costumes implemented a primitive style, not unlike that seen in works of Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. Gill Perry defined 'primitive' in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as "Eurocentric, as revealing a Western-centered view of an alien culture."<sup>93</sup> Although *The Rite of Spring* portrays the origins of Russian culture as understood by native Russian artists, the setting in which the ballet premiered, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and the foreignness of the subject matter to Parisian viewers, makes this ballet take on a 'primitive' nature.

Igor Stravinsky originally devised the concept of Russian glory demonstrated through prehistoric folklore, and thus his musical composition must be considered first to understand the primitive themes at play. His inspiration for the piece occurred in 1910, but the piece was not completed until after the performance of his two other ballets, *Firebird* and *Petrushka*.<sup>94</sup> But while his previous works adhered to Western musical tradition in their reference to Russian tunes, *The Rite of Spring* offered an entirely different approach. In his autobiography, Stravinsky explained, "I saw in my imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring."<sup>95</sup> To convey this theme, the musician drew from principles of Russian folklore. The melody, established by the

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<sup>93</sup> Gill Perry, *Primitivism and the 'Modern'* 5.

<sup>94</sup> Ziolkowski, 75.

<sup>95</sup> Igor Stravinsky, *Autobiography* (1936) (London: Calder, 1975), 31. Quoted in Ziolkowski, 78.

bassoon solo in the opening bars, challenged standard customs as it was played at a pitch at the top of the instrument's range to make it almost unidentifiable. The score was monumental in every respect and even required a massive orchestra of ninety-nine musicians as opposed to the typical eighty-two.<sup>96</sup> Through abstraction, Stravinsky captured primal qualities that he believed conveyed, "a moral so common to the human race as to make an international appeal."<sup>97</sup> Stravinsky developed a primitive quality through a heavy emphasis on syncopated rhythms, which one might hear in tribal ritual. The artists invested countless hours of careful preparation and rehearsal to ensure that on stage the ritual would appear to develop as organically as possible. He achieved an overall haphazard effect to his sound, but in actuality, the composition required extreme organization. In fact, the orchestra needed seventeen rehearsals to master the music (by contrast, *Firebird* required only nine).<sup>98</sup> Henri Quittard remarked:

Though the music of *Le Sacre du Printemps* is complex in appearance, though it tries to be far outside the received forms and conventions, it is easy to decipher its outlines, freed of the tinsely barbarism and the noisy discord which the composer saw fit to provide it. After all this analytical work, it seems that it contains no prodigious innovations from which a rejuvenation of the art might one day spring. Its underpinnings are quite regular, more than might be expected from a revolutionary.<sup>99</sup>

Most importantly, however, Stravinsky captured this sensation by employing primitivism to evoke what he considered, "a specifically Russian character."<sup>100</sup>

Vaslav Nijinsky's concept for the choreography of *The Rite of Spring* reinforced Stravinsky's musical themes. He captured the essence of the primitive ritual through

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<sup>96</sup> Kelly, 280.

<sup>97</sup> Stravinsky, 31. Quoted in Ziolkowski, 78.

<sup>98</sup> Ziolkowski, 78.

<sup>99</sup> Henri Quittard, "Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Le Sacre du Printemps*: scenes of pagan Russia, in two acts, music by M. Igor Stravinsky: choreography by M. Nijinsky: sets and costumes by M. Roerich," *Le Figaro*, May 31, 1913. Quoted in Kelly, 307.

<sup>100</sup> Kelly, 307.

abstract movement.<sup>101</sup> The spectacle created at the premiere production of *The Rite of Spring* indeed took on the quality of performance art, generating a shared experience between the dancers and audience members that could never be exactly replicated. Having previously performed in Orientalist ballets, Nijinsky understood the way balletic elements could capture specific artistic styles. To give *The Rite of Spring* a unique quality, Nijinsky chose to completely disregard conventional balletic vocabulary. Avoiding the elegance and lightness of dancing *en pointe*, an artistic choice as well as a constraint of Roerich's costumes, Nijinsky adopted heavy stomping movements (Fig. 22). For the female sacrifice performed by Maria Piltz in the final act of the ballet, Nijinsky inserted a jumping sequence in which her landings on the ground corresponded with the musical accents, placing an emphasis on her downward motion. Jean Cocteau described her performance as "a naïve and mad dance, an insect-dance, of a doe fascinated by a boa, of a factory blowing up, in fact the most overpowering spectacle in the theatre that I can remember."<sup>102</sup> Overall, Nijinsky promoted an earthiness to the movements. Nijinsky echoed this motion in the bodies of the corps members, whose hunched bodies, heavy jumps, and flexed feet established a physical connection between the Russian dancers and the earth below (Fig. 23). Following this movement, the female soloist dropped into a deep lunge, throwing her arms up toward the sky. Her desperate grasp towards the pagan gods above provided spiritual interaction before her impending death. Paired together, these movements, emphasizing the earth and the sky, tying together the concepts of

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<sup>101</sup> His experimental work, in certain ways, behaved as a precursor to the Dada dances performed at the Cabaret Voltaire.

<sup>102</sup> Cocteau. Quoted in Kelly, 325.

“Mother Russia” and “Mother Earth.” Thus, Nijinsky’s choreography used pagan ritual culture to unite the Russian nation with the divine rulers of nature.<sup>103</sup>

Finally, Nikolai Roerich set the ballet’s “prehistoric” tone, both in his two paintings that served as backdrops for each act and in his designs for the performers’ costumes. These vibrantly painted landscapes and animal skin-wearing dancers created a striking contrast from *Les Sylphides*. Although Roerich was a Russian celebrating the raw, untainted essence of his country’s past, his French audience must have recognized, or at very least intuited, certain uncomfortable connections between his backdrops and costumes and the emerging avant-garde in painting. The exhibitions of Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings at the Salon d’Automne in 1903 and 1905, followed closely by Matisse’s turn to African subject matter and Picasso’s seminal ‘African Period’, had all served to establish a certain ‘primitivist’ foundation in modern art. Now it seemed that that the refined art of ballet, too, was succumbing to the epoch’s ‘wild beasts’.<sup>104</sup>

Roerich promoted this celebration of primitive Russia in *The Rite of Spring* through set and costume design. In a desire to capture the raw, untainted essence of Russia’s pagan past, Roerich strayed from tradition. Instead, he employed a style that for French viewers seemed to draw from techniques of artists like Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. He stripped his Russian homeland down to its most austere, untouched state. Unlike *The Afternoon of a Faun* (Fig. 24), which exhibited Léon Bakst’s primitive yet idealized style, *The Rite of Spring* maintained no delicacy or sense of propriety. This transition brought about a level of shock comparable to that after

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<sup>103</sup> Garafola and Baer, 134.

<sup>104</sup> The Fauve movement, led by André Derain and Henri Matisse, had debuted at the Salon d’Automne in 1905. The wild colors and brushstrokes of these artists’ paintings famously prompted Louis Vauxcelles to describe them as ‘fauves’ – that is, ‘wild beasts.’

Picasso's sudden transition from his Rose to African period. The thematic content of the ballet referenced pagan ritual and naïve notions of humanity. Roerich's organic forms fashioned this ancient depiction of Russia into the source from which all else was founded. He declared this form of his homeland as the ideal, and in the process, insulted and degraded the European civilized society of his viewers.

For the first act of the ballet, entitled *The Adoration of the Earth* (Fig. 25), Roerich painted a set depicting a vast landscape with bright green rolling hills and a blue sea. In the foreground, two hills frame either side of the scene. Small trees with cotton-candy-like tufts of leaves cover each hill, while yellow and red wildflowers blanket the grass below. At the center, an enormous dark brown tree bisects the image, with wiry, mostly bare branches extending outward and upward to fill the entire height of the painting. A series of large grey and white stones wraps around the tree to create a circular formation. More green and blue hills enclose a small lake in the background. Roerich depicted these mounds as smooth semi-circular forms, devoid of foliage. Stratus clouds cover the top half of the image. They fall low on the horizon line to indicate a hazy, overcast day. Roerich inverted the lines of the hilly landscape from the bottom half of the scene in the shapes of the clouds above, creating a dynamic relationship between earth and sky.

Variation of brushstroke allowed Roerich to create an idealized and imagined rural scene. He used wide, smooth streaks of paint in varying shades of brown with undertones of red and yellow to depict the bark of the central tree. This impressionistic approach allowed him to utilize shadows and highlights to effectively capture the sense of gnarled, winding branches as they wrapped around one another. He emphasized the

immense mass of the tree, making it disproportionately larger than any other part of the landscape. Roerich literally rooted the tree at the center of the composition, not only within the canvas, but also on the stage amongst the performers. By contrast, the delicate brushstrokes used to dust wildflowers across the front-most hills in the landscape possess a lightness and freeness. This abstracted dappling of color effectively gives the sense of a lush landscape without naturalistically representing the forms. Similarly, the frothy streaks of green and yellow atop thin beige wisps of paint along the hills provide the impression of trees. While Roerich suggested modeling in the individual forms, he manipulated the overall depth of field in his painting to flatten the picture plane. The dark blue lake and the surrounding hills across the back of the landscape appear rather two-dimensional. Roerich painted them as nearly solid blocks of color, with faint but distinct black outlines surrounding each, making them completely un-naturalistic. A thin horizontal block of white paint creates a narrow separation between earth and sky, comprised of an expanse of clouds floating in from the upper right corner.

Roerich captured a thriving natural world, devoid of the impact of human existence—what Goldwater describes as a “geographical romanticism.”<sup>105</sup> Cocteau elaborated, “It brought an indispensable dynamite... a symphony impregnated with savage pathos, with earth in the throes of birth.”<sup>106</sup> According to the program, the first act embodied:

Spring. The Earth is covered with flowers. The Earth is covered with grass.  
A great joy reigns on the Earth. Mankind delivers itself up to the dance and seeks to know the future by following the rites. The eldest of all the Sages himself takes

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<sup>105</sup> Goldwater, 63. Goldwater uses this phrase in reference to Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings. By immersing himself in ‘barbarian’ cultures, Gauguin sought a sense of purity and genuineness in his work. In the same way, in *The Rite of Spring*, I would argue, primitive elements aimed to evoke ideas of an ancient Russian land, pure and untainted by modernity.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

part in the Glorification of Spring. He is led forward to unite himself with the abundant and superb Earth. Everyone stamps the Earth ecstatically.<sup>107</sup>

Roerich's landscape does not aim to depict a specific existing location; it captures his own Romanticized idea of an ancient Russian landscape, one lost with the onslaught of Europeanization and civilized society. The vivid colors enveloped the stage and dancers. In addition, the individual French audience members became comparatively miniscule in relation to the all-powerful natural scene that encompassed them. Further, Roerich's tree at the center of the scene figuratively and literally became a connector between earth and sky above. This axis mundi-like symbol, in conjunction with the referential movements of Nijinsky's choreography, actively signified the relationship between Russian land and heavenliness. In a letter to Diaghilev, Roerich discusses the ballet's narrative, describing a moment in which "the wisest ancient is brought from the village to imprint his sacred kiss on the new-flowering earth."<sup>108</sup> This symbolic kiss consecrates Roerich's message of divine Russian soil. Roerich's work almost beckons his viewers to follow the example of the performers; they, too, should genuflect and demonstrate their respect to Russian land.

The second set for the ballet, used in the second act, entitled, *The Sacrifice* (Fig. 26), appears to be a closer look into the previous landscape. While the first act isolated the audience from the performers in a position of detached observation, the scale of this landscape places the viewer much closer to the performers and the events taking place, making this act much more intimate. Roerich depicted what he described as "the sacred hill" covered in the same fluffy trees of the previous scene.<sup>109</sup> In the foreground, a large

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<sup>107</sup> Text appearing in the program of the Ballets Russes, May 29, 1913. Quoted in Kelly, 303.

<sup>108</sup> Serge Lifar, *Diaghilev: His Life, His Work, His Legend* (London: Putnam, 1940), 278. Quoted in Kelly, 270.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

boulder sits close to the center of the image, with smaller “enchanted rocks” circling around it, referencing the similar formation surrounding the tree in the previous act. The clouds now completely fill the sky, hovering very low along the tops of the hills as if about to engulf everything beneath them. The limited glimpses of dark blue sky peeking through imply that the viewer has virtually no route for escape from what is about to ensue. In this manner, Roerich devised an ominous atmosphere which the program describes taking place:

After the day. After midnight.

On the hills are the consecrated stones. The adolescents play the mystic games and seek the Great Way. They glorify, they acclaim Her who has been designated to be delivered to the God. The ancestors are invoked, venerated witnesses. And the wise Ancestors of Mankind contemplate the sacrifice.

This is the way to sacrifice to Iarilo the magnificent, the flamboyant [flaming].<sup>110</sup>

Roerich’s paintings provided the sensation that the stage was contained and controlled by Iarilo, god of the harvest of spring. The topography creates a concave shape in both landscapes to isolate the dancers within a valley. They are left the sole option to express their devotion through sacrificial practice.

The themes apparent in Roerich’s landscapes share remarkable commonalities with the Tahitian landscapes of Gauguin. In particular, a comparison of Roerich’s painting for *The Sacrifice* in Act II with Gauguin’s *Tahitian Landscape* (Fig. 27) painted in 1891 reveals the influential style of the French artist. Gauguin’s work features a lush landscape with two footpaths leading up the center of the composition towards a massive purple mountain piercing into a beautiful blue sky. He fills the middle ground with a variety of exotic trees. The highly abstracted scene suggests a greater emphasis on the use of contrasting colors to evoke an idea of a landscape rather than a realistic representation.

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<sup>110</sup> Text appearing in the program of the Ballets Russes, May 29, 1913. Kelly, 303.

Roerich looked to Gauguin, as well as Matisse and Cézanne to find a ‘primitive’ style that he could appropriate to suit his nationalistic stance. The unrefined quality of these artists’ designs embodied the essence of an ideologically pure pagan past.

Costumes created the final means by which Roerich materialized his vision. During *Les Sylphides* audience members were primed with the diaphanous form-flattering tulle tutus that softly floated as dancers glided across the stage. These costumes, and the ballet itself, received their name in honor of Filippo Taglioni’s classical ballet *La Sylphide* from 1832. Thus, Roerich’s design for *The Rite of Spring* defied audience members’ expectations with a departure from a century-long tradition. Roerich’s costume choices were not his own invention; rather, he saw himself as an anthropologist of ancient Russian tradition.<sup>111</sup> In a letter to Diaghilev, he wrote, “I love antiquity for its sublime happiness and its deep thoughts.”<sup>112</sup> He played a pivotal role in conceptualizing the ballet and guiding his fellow artists in the accurate portrayal of the period. He explains, “In the ballet of *The Rite of Spring* conceived by myself and Stravinsky, my object was to present a number of pictures of earthly joy and celestial triumph, as understood by the Slavs.”<sup>113</sup> For him, the anthropological accuracy held priority over movement quality. After looking to a Russian princess’s collection of ethnic costumes for his designs, he opted for shapeless, long traditional tunics rather than light airy fabrics (Fig. 28).<sup>114</sup> A collection of traditional Slavic clothing in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, Croatia displays long white tunics colorfully embroidered with designs similar to

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<sup>111</sup> Kelly, 269.

<sup>112</sup> Lifar, 278. Quoted in Kelly, 270.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. Diaghilev, as well as Stravinsky and Nijinsky seemed to trust his descriptions of Russian tradition as fact, although present day anthropologists question some of his judgments.

<sup>114</sup> Ziolkowski, 76.

the ones on Roerich's costumes (Fig. 29). Long, dark, braided wigs adorning the heads of the women extended to the mid-thigh. Full, unkempt beards covered the men's faces. In the second act, the men even cloaked themselves in bearskins to suggest to viewers "that the bear was man's ancestor."<sup>115</sup> In traditional ballets, pink satin pointe shoes softly blended into the dancers pink tights, allowing the foot to act as an extension of the leg; Roerich instead called for colorful, flat-footed ballet slippers with ribbons that wrapped up to the knee, visually chopping up the lines of the dancers' movements. One horrified reviewer commented, "[I]magine people decked out in the most garish colors, pointed bonnets and bathrobes, animal skins or purple tunics."<sup>116</sup> Roerich's costumes explicitly broke the norms of classical ballet in favor of achieving his perception of ancient Russia.

Although artists had created Primitive paintings by this time, they revealed their works to a limited audience. The Academy still did not fully respect this style as a legitimate progression in artistic development, and they did not display paintings of this genre in salons until 1919. As a result, a general consensus on taste amongst the more conservative French crowd attending the ballet deemed the Primitive ballet to be an artistic abomination. A review in *Comoedia* opened with the line, "'Where were those slob brought up?' That was the most accommodating thing that was said, among many others in the course of this elegant and memorable evening."<sup>117</sup> Another audience member purportedly shouted, "They are ripe for colonization!" from his seat.<sup>118</sup> Emile Henriot explained, "That was all so new: those dissonances, that frenetic barbarism on

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ziolkowski, 81.

<sup>117</sup> Gustave de Pawlowski, Lousi Vuillemin, Louis Schneider, "At the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: 'Le Sacre du Printemps,' ballet in two acts, by M. Igor Stravinsky," *Comoedia*, May 31, 1913. Kelly, 308.

<sup>118</sup> Anonymous, "The Premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps* by the Russian Ballet at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées," *Comoedia Illustré*, June 5, 1913. Kelly, 315.

stage, that unknown liturgy, all that escaped us.”<sup>119</sup> The elegant men and women in the boxed seats shouted in anger, and those in the less prestigious balconies retaliated back. The audience disagreed over the artistic merit of the ballet, and felt the need to vocally express their frustrations. The cries from the audience created immense disruption on stage as well, as the dancers struggled even to hear the orchestra. Still, they carried on, and ultimately, the crowd hushed to a silence only for Maria Piltz’ solo. The vivid emotion in her sacrificial dance completely stunned the audience. Romola Nijinska explained, “It was of such indescribable force, had such beauty, that in its conviction of sacrifice it disarmed even the chaotic audience. They forgot to fight.”<sup>120</sup>

Although ‘primitivist’ foundations existed in modern art, this did not mean they were widely admired. Indeed, even the term ‘fauve’ acted as a derogatory description of the style. Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (Fig. 30), painted in 1907, was so wrapped in controversy that it was essentially unseen by the general public for almost three decades. Dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler even remarked, “Derain told me one day Picasso would be found hanging behind his big picture.”<sup>121</sup> By adopting the same aesthetic, Diaghilev subjected his work to the same criticism. Regardless of artistic medium, the primitive aesthetic shocked and repulsed viewers. This vehement distaste for a ‘primitive’ aesthetic indicated the influence of social and political ideology shared by Parisian society. The larger societal implications ultimately act as the underlying motivation for the riot at *The Rite of Spring*.

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<sup>119</sup> Emile Henriot, “Les Ballets Russes,” *La Revue Musicale* 11 (December 1930; a special number on the Russian Ballet): 398-99. Kelly, 328.

<sup>120</sup> Romola Nijinska, *Nijinsky* (London: Gollancz, 1933), 199-200). Kelly, 320.

<sup>121</sup> Anna C. Chave, “New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism,” *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 76, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), 596.

You do a good job of articulating the artistic context of the time. You also analyze well all the elements that went into the production of this ballet: music, set design, costumes, and choreography.

## Conclusion

In the ballet, where it is not necessary to listen to words, where the eye is not disturbed by the monstrosities inevitable in the opera... I would point to the elemental mixture of visual and aural impressions; in the ballet is attained the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* about which Wagner dreamed and about which every artistically gifted person dreams.—Alexandre Benois<sup>122</sup>

The realm of ballet offered Diaghilev and the artists involved in the Ballets Russes to capture the totality of art in a manner beyond the possibilities of *The World of Art*. Musical score, sets, costumes, and choreography came together to create distinct works that inspired a visceral response from their viewers. Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Roerich approached ballet in a new way for the making of *The Rite of Spring*. Described as one of Diaghilev's "most beloved creations," the work took on an appearance far different from its predecessors in The Ballets Russes' repertoire.<sup>123</sup> It bore no resemblance to the Orientalist style that Parisian viewers had become trained to expect due to ballets like *Shéhérazade* and *Firebird*. Further, this ballet bore absolutely no resemblance to *Les Sylphides*, an example of the purest form of traditional balletic. The drastic shift to what appeared as a 'primitive' style stunned audiences, leading to a riot of unanticipated proportions. To relegate the audience's total uproar as nothing more than a natural response to the ballet's bizarre formal elements would be a superficial and inadequate explanation of the event. In actuality, the pandemonium that ensued emerged from the artistic methods employed. The stylistic choices made by Diaghilev spoke

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<sup>122</sup> Alexandre Benois, "Russkie spektakli v Parizhe ('Schéhérazade')," *Rech'* (No. 188, July 12, 1910). Quoted in Kennedy, 343.

<sup>123</sup> Serge Lifar, *Serge Diaghilev; his life, his work, his legend* (London, 1940), 279. Quoted in Kennedy, 367.

aroused the diplomatic concerns occupying the minds of the French people, exasperating their misinterpretations of a Russian folk influence for a purely 'primitive' ideology. For Diaghilev, *The Rite of Spring* celebrating a pagan rite provided him with a new avenue through which to develop art in a uniquely Russian style. But for France, the ballet demonstrated a denial of French standards, and further, a brazen disregard of French authority within the nation's capitol city of Paris.

The fearlessness with which Diaghilev approached the design of *The Rite of Spring* carried on in each of his subsequent ballets. Although The Ballets Russes only performed the original choreography of *The Rite of Spring* five times before turning to a less controversial depiction, the ballet lives on. Numerous companies have restaged the ballet throughout the past century, and in 1987, the Joffrey Ballet accomplished the enormous feat of reviving the original sets, costumes, and choreography to bring this historic work to contemporary audiences. While they did not result in the same outcry, his work successfully defined a precedent for future dance companies. The stunning impact he inspired with the *Rite of Spring* acted as a predecessor for more works featuring the designs of forward-thinking Russian and French painters including Pablo Picasso, Joan Mirò, André Derain, and Henri Matisse; fashion designers like Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel; musicians such as Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, and Sergei Prokofiev; and choreographers like Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, and George Balanchine. After Diaghilev's death in 1929, these artists continued his legacy, channeled their talents into the development of new companies. The Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, the Royal Ballet in England, the American Ballet Theatre, and the New York City Ballet all emerged as offspring of the Ballets Russes. Even today,

many of these companies preserve the original works of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes as a valued part of their repertoire.

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## Figure List

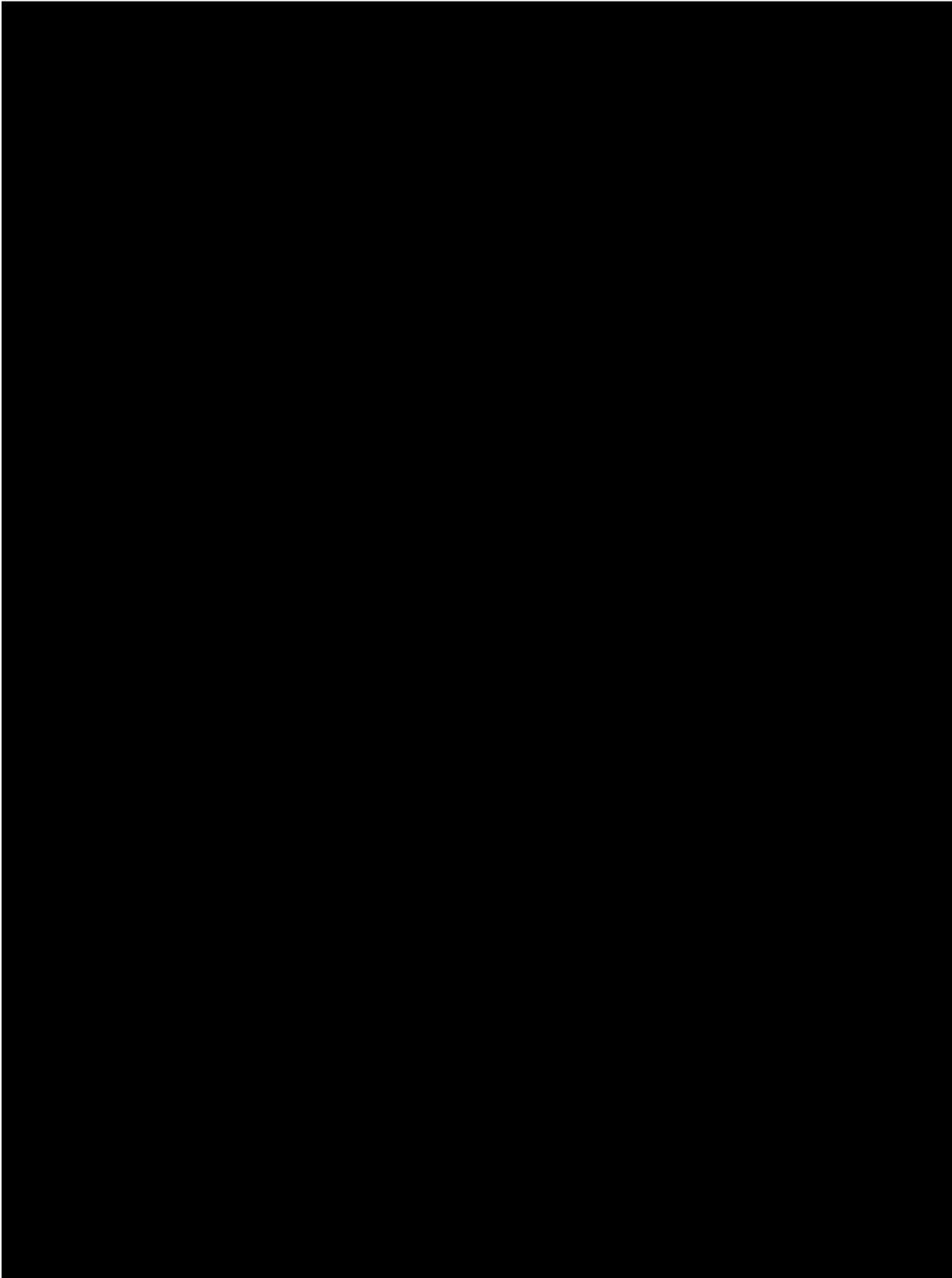


Fig. 1. Léon Bakst, *Portrait of Sergei Diaghilev and his Nurse*, 1906. Oil on canvas.  
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

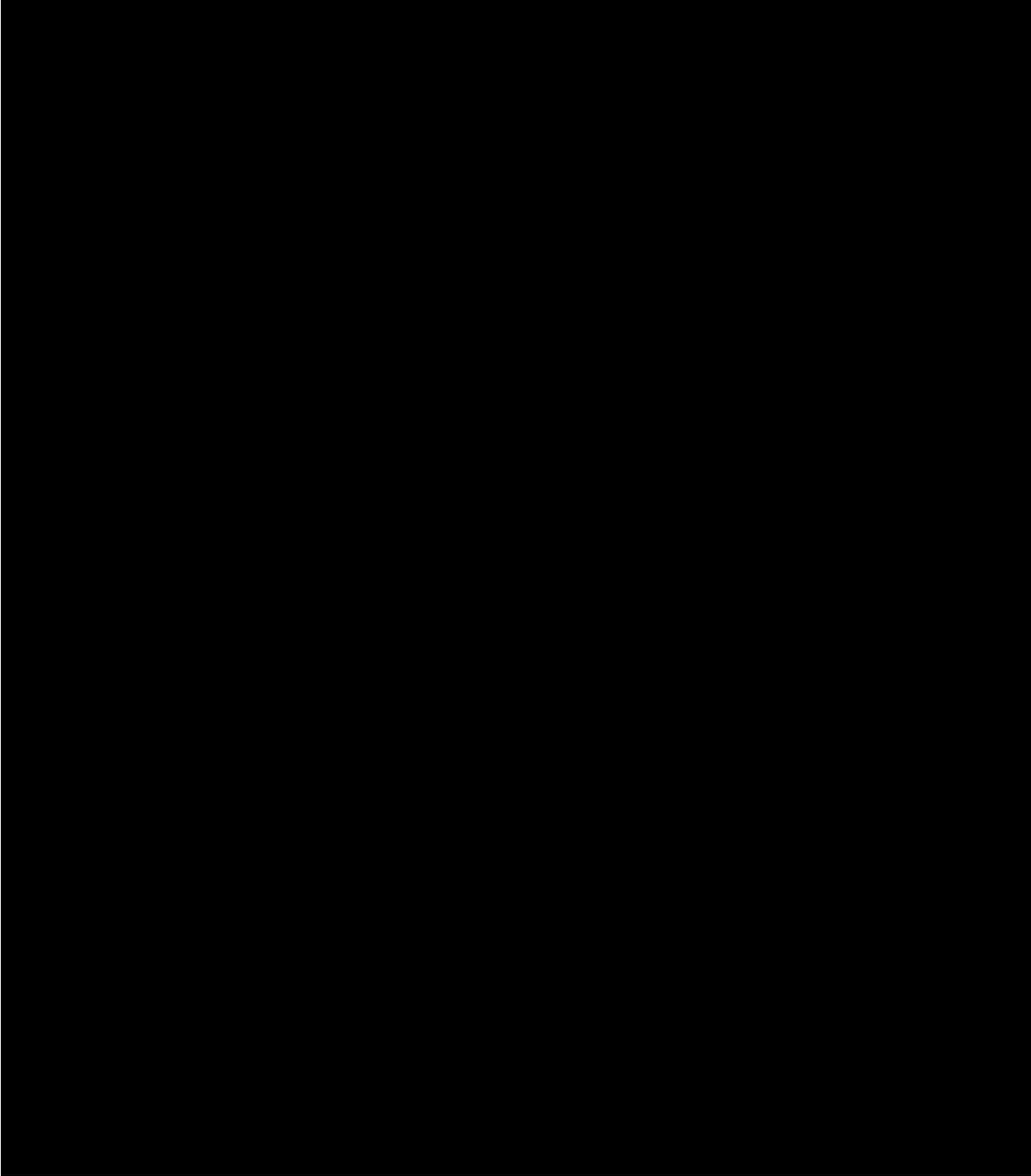


Fig. 2. Valentin Serov, *Anna Pavlova in the Ballet "Les Sylphides,"* 1909. Tempera on tinted canvas. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Fig. 3. Alexandre Benois, *Les Sylphides* set design illustration, 1909. Pen and watercolor over pencil and leadpoint. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

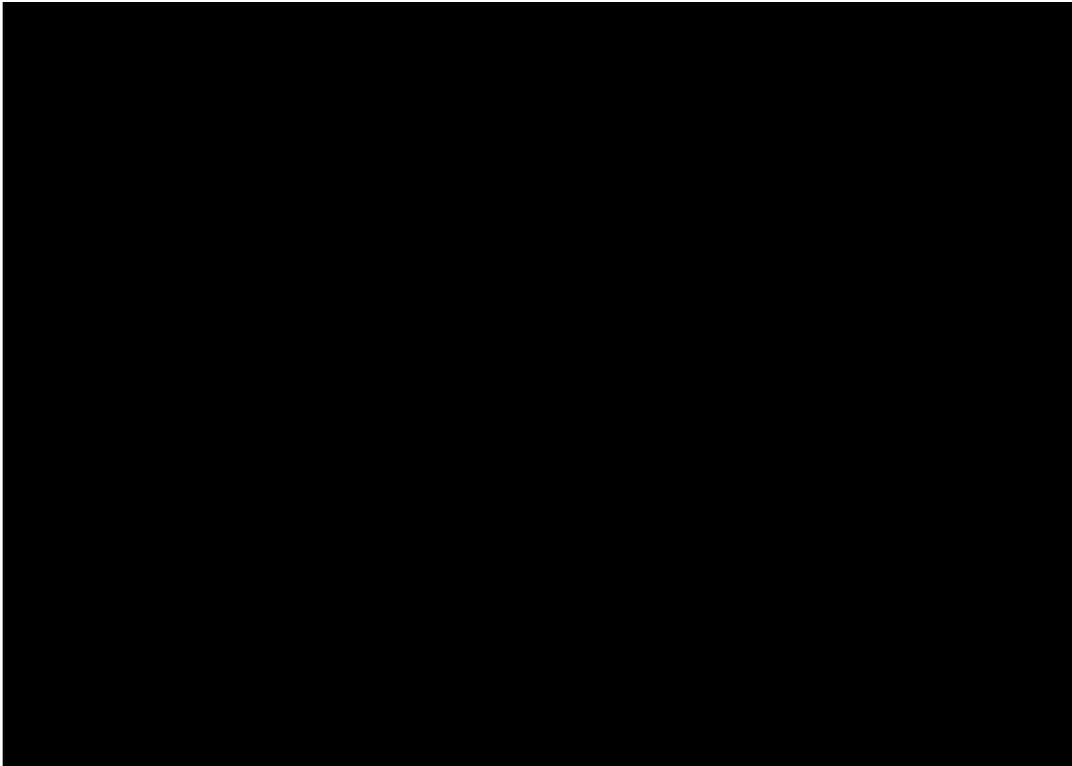


Fig. 4. Ballets Russes, *The Rite of Spring*, 1913. Photograph.

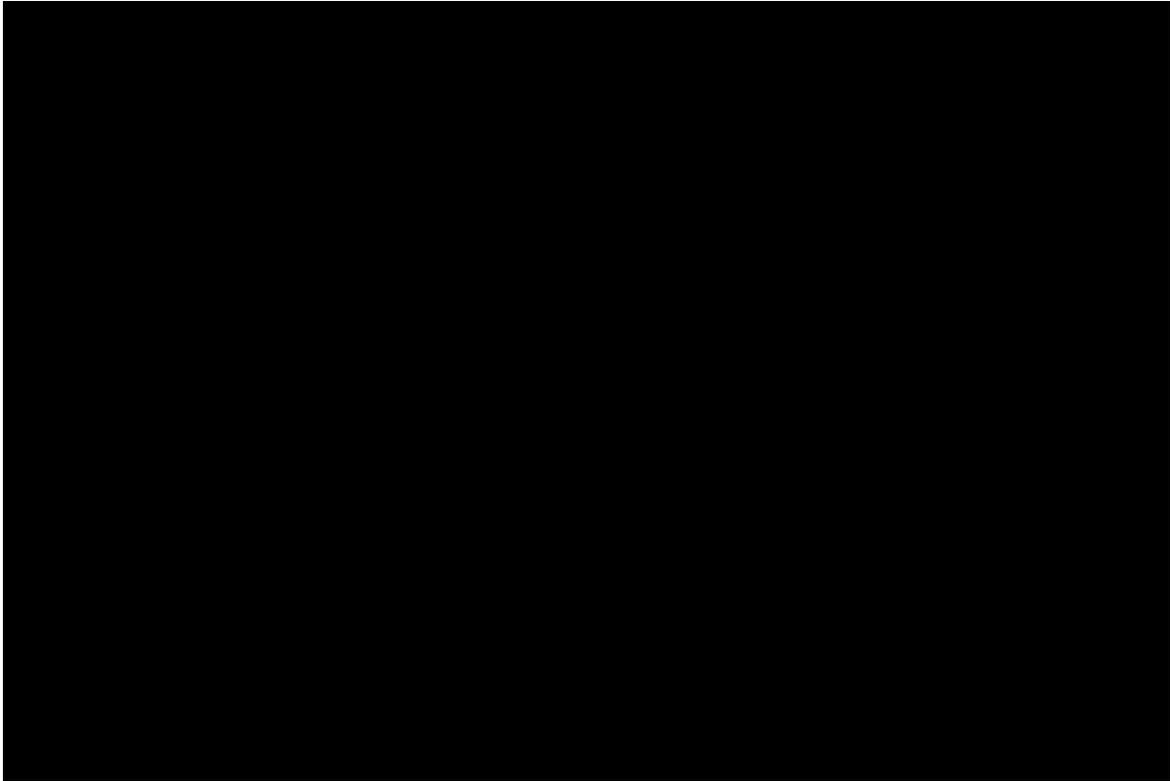


Fig. 5. Joseph Cassien-Bernard and Gaston Cousin (architects); Jean Résal and Amédée d'Alby (engineers), *Pont Alexandre III*, 1896-1900. Paris.

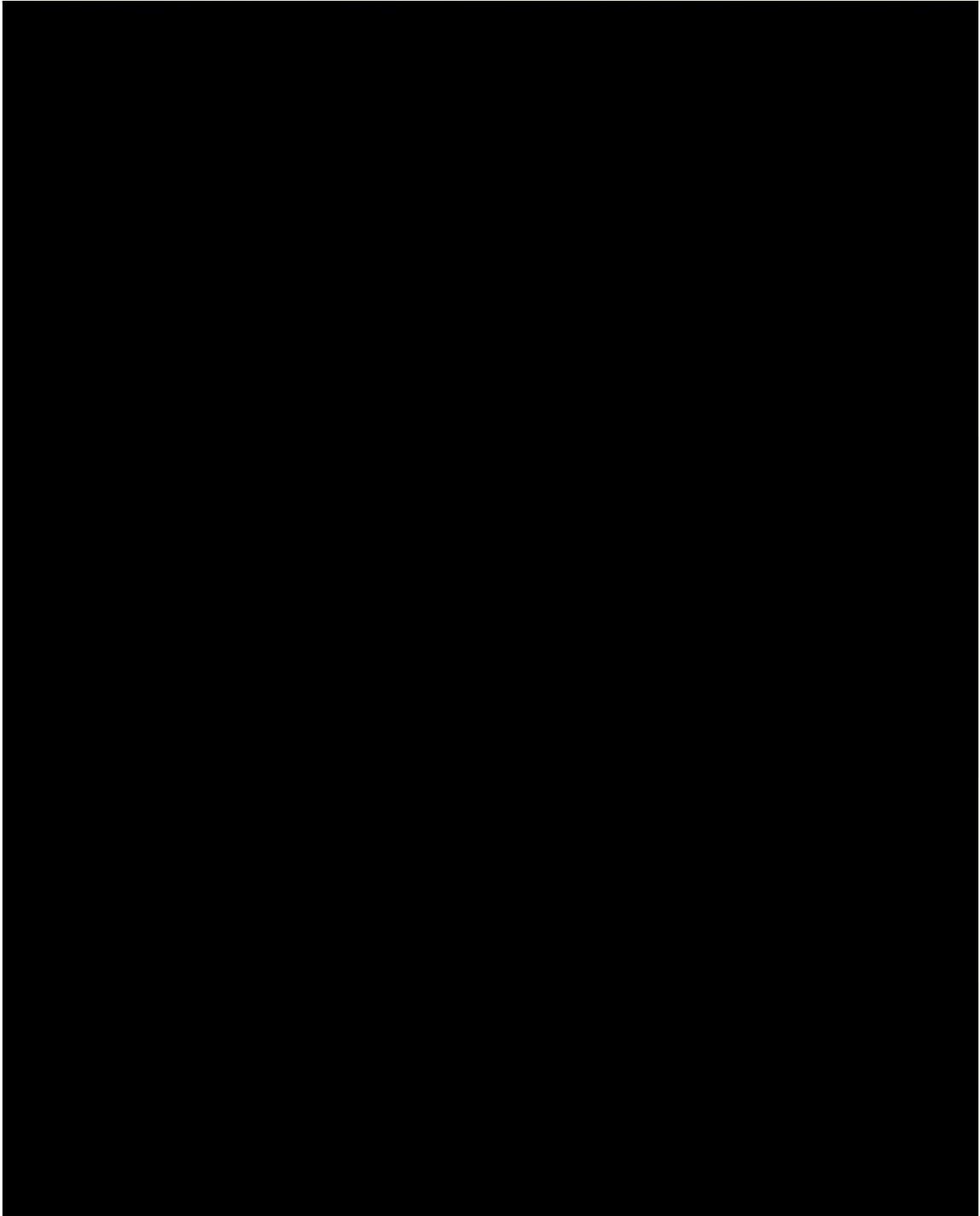


Fig. 6. Ivan Bilibin, *The Tale of Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird, and Gray Wolf*, 1899.

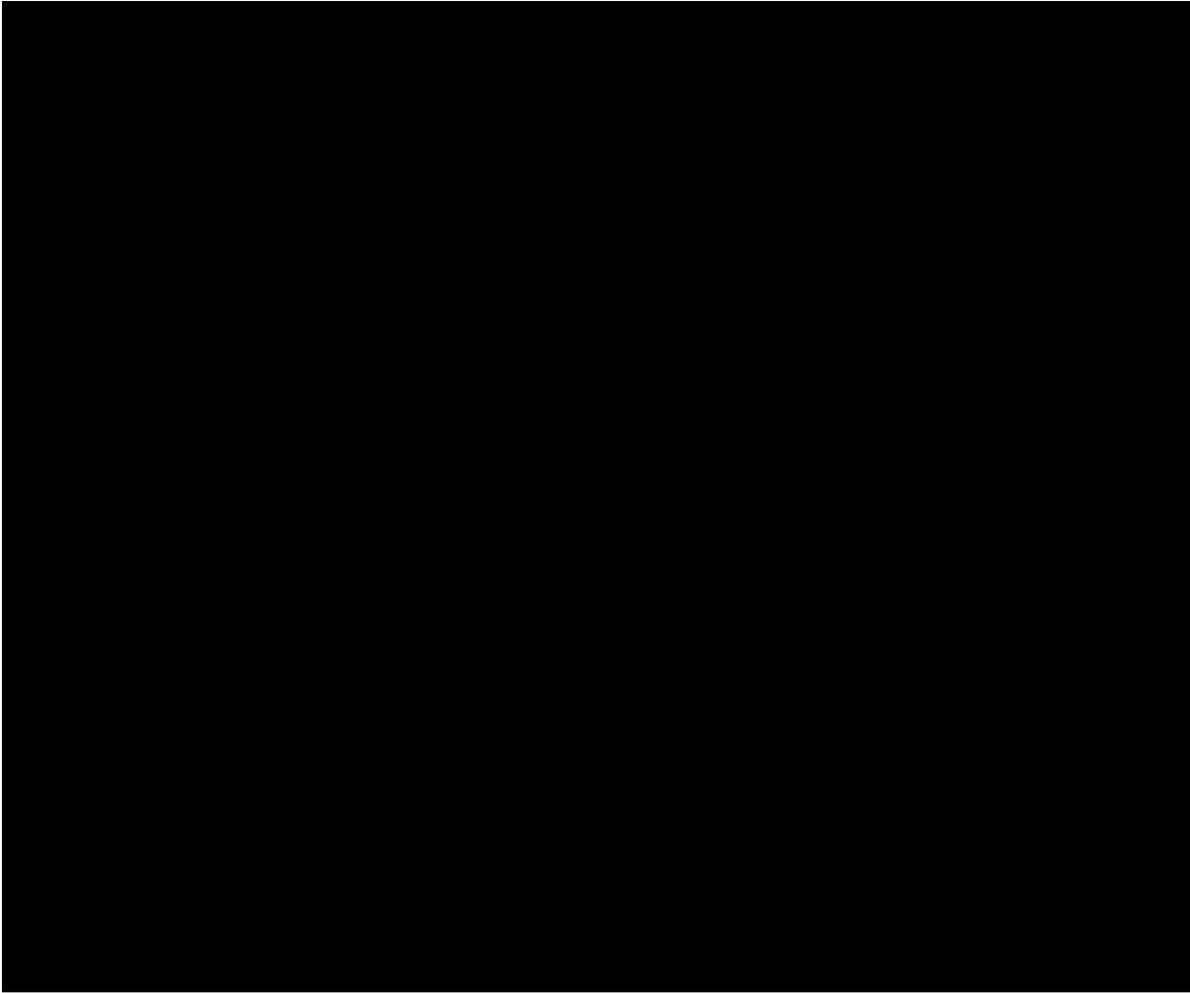


Fig. 7. Nikolai Roerich, *Idols (Pagan Russia)*, 1901-1910. Gouache on panel. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Fig. 8. Nikolai Roerich, *Sorcerers*, 1905. Gouache on panel. The Museum of Russian Art, Kiev.

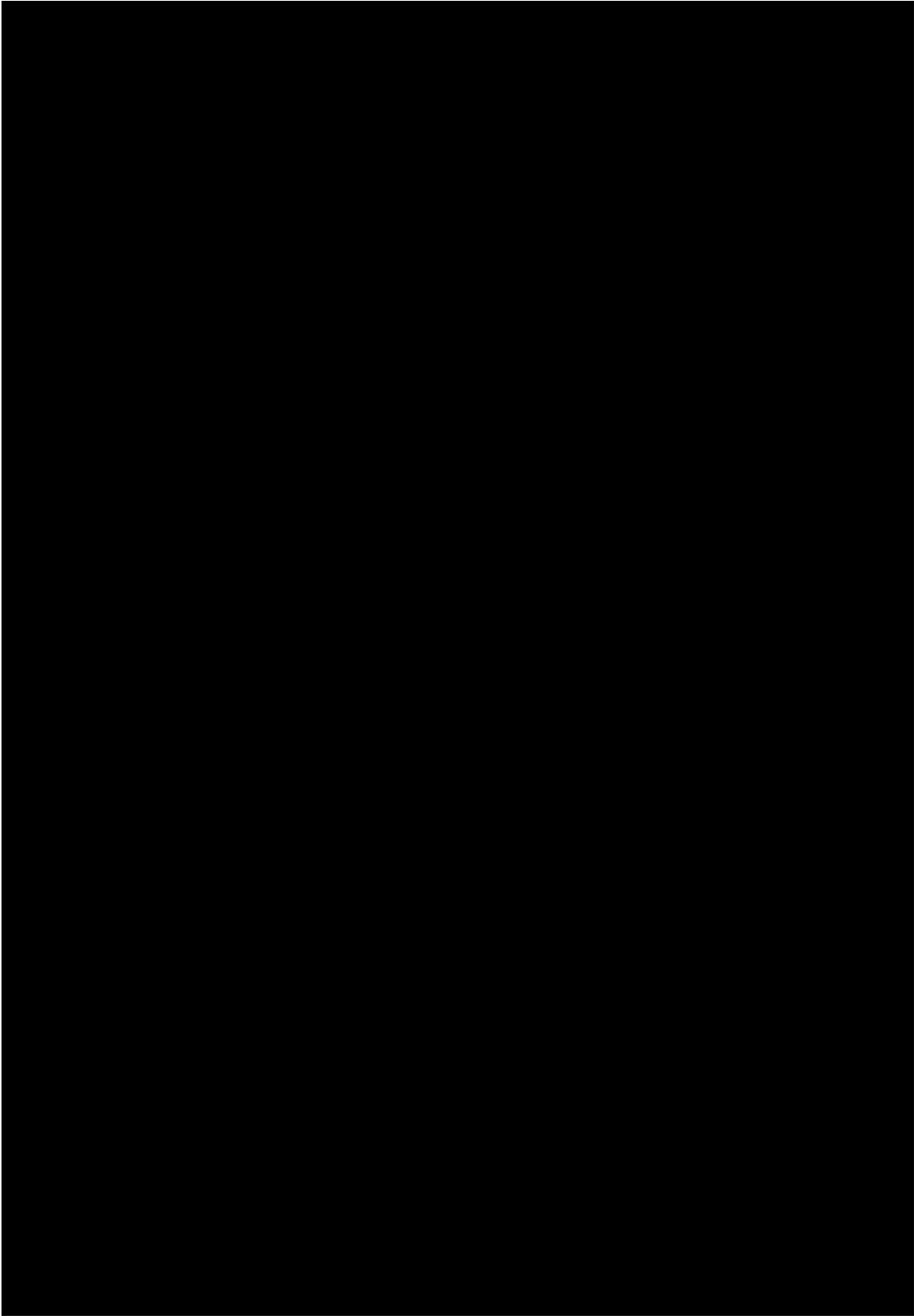


Fig. 9. Léon Bakst, *Supper*, 1902. Oil on canvas.

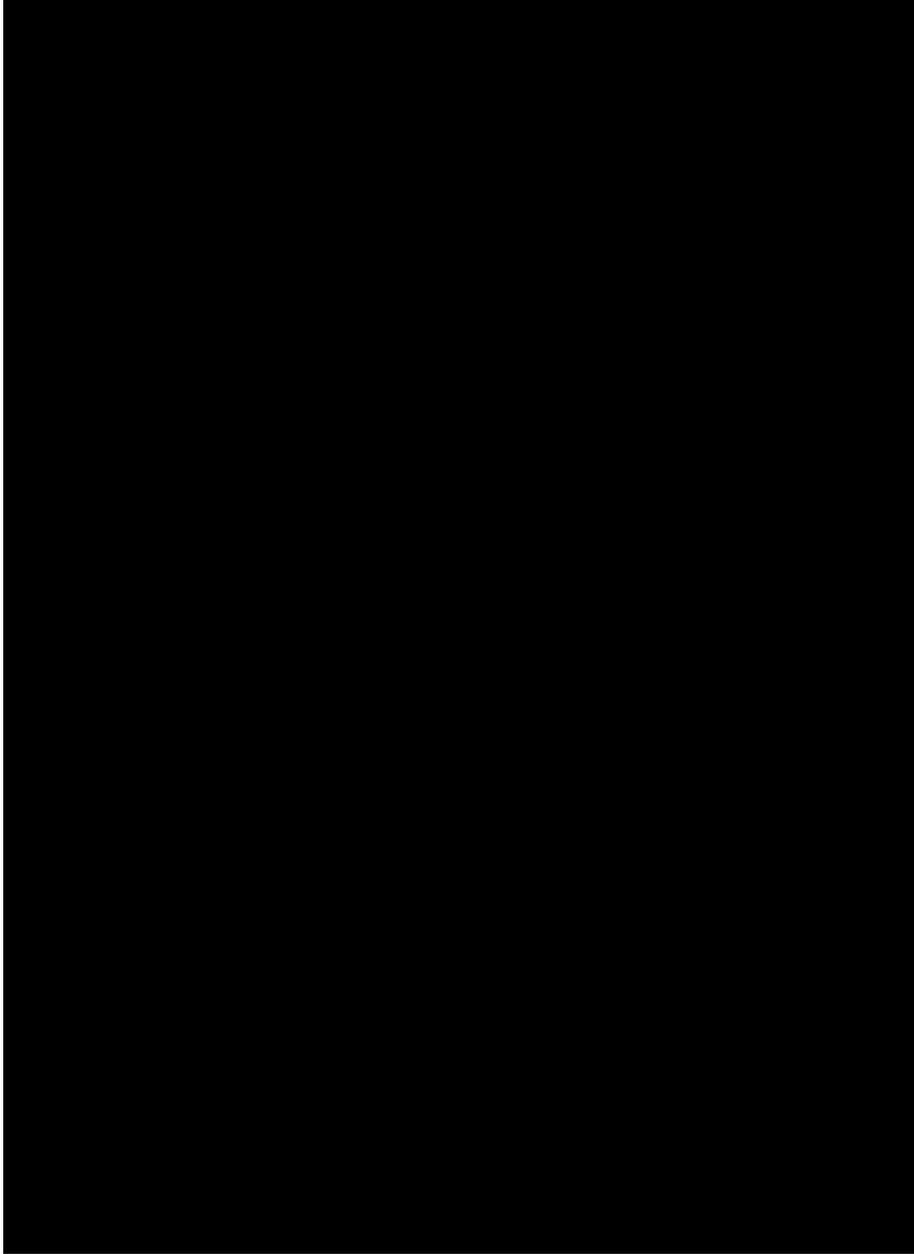


Fig. 10. Alexander Golovin, *A Spanish Woman in Green*, 1906-907.



Fig. 11. Nikolai Sapunov, *The Carousel*, 1908.

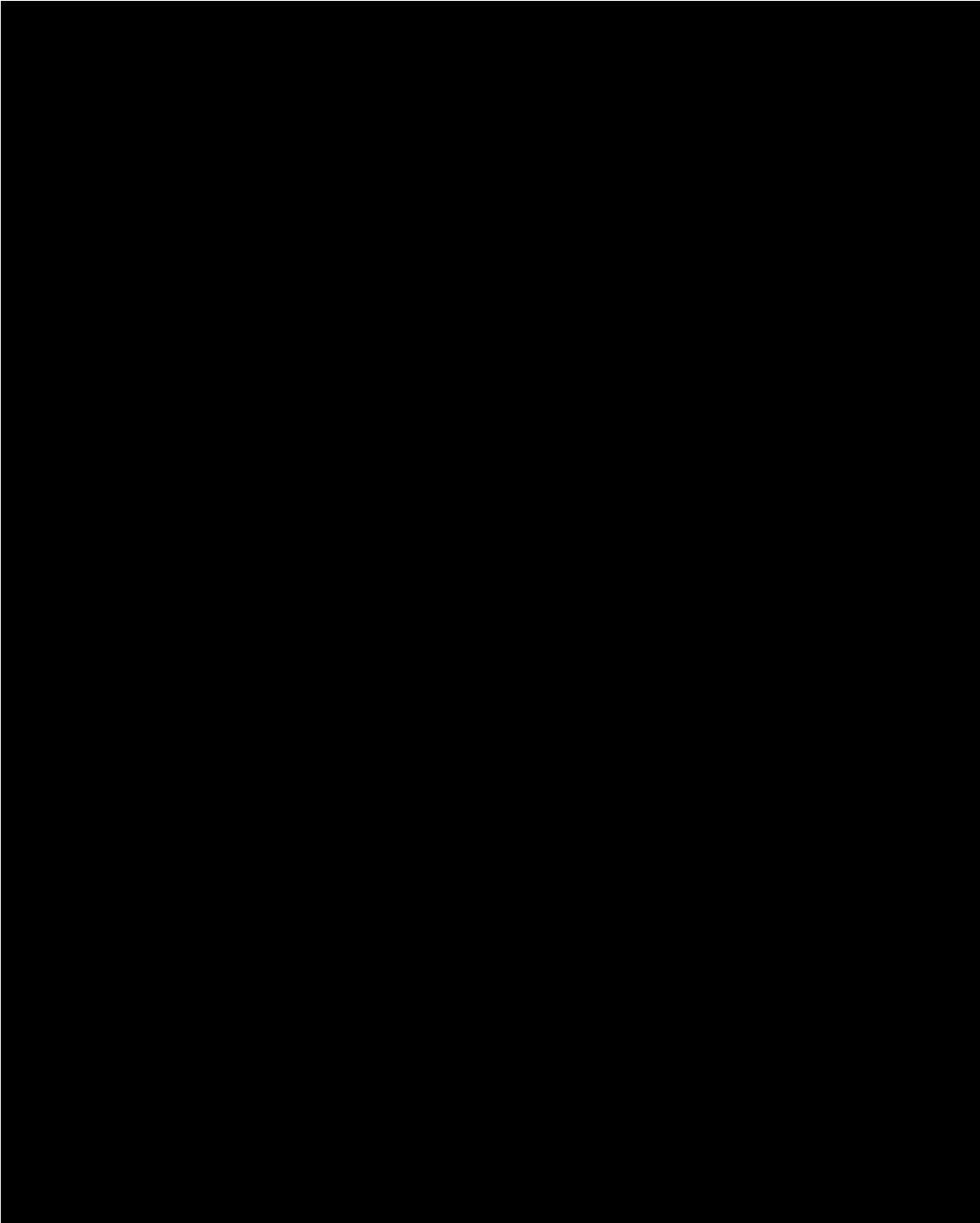


Fig. 12. Léon Bakst, *Schéhérazaïe: Supplement of Comoedia Illustre*, June, 15, 1910.  
Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris.

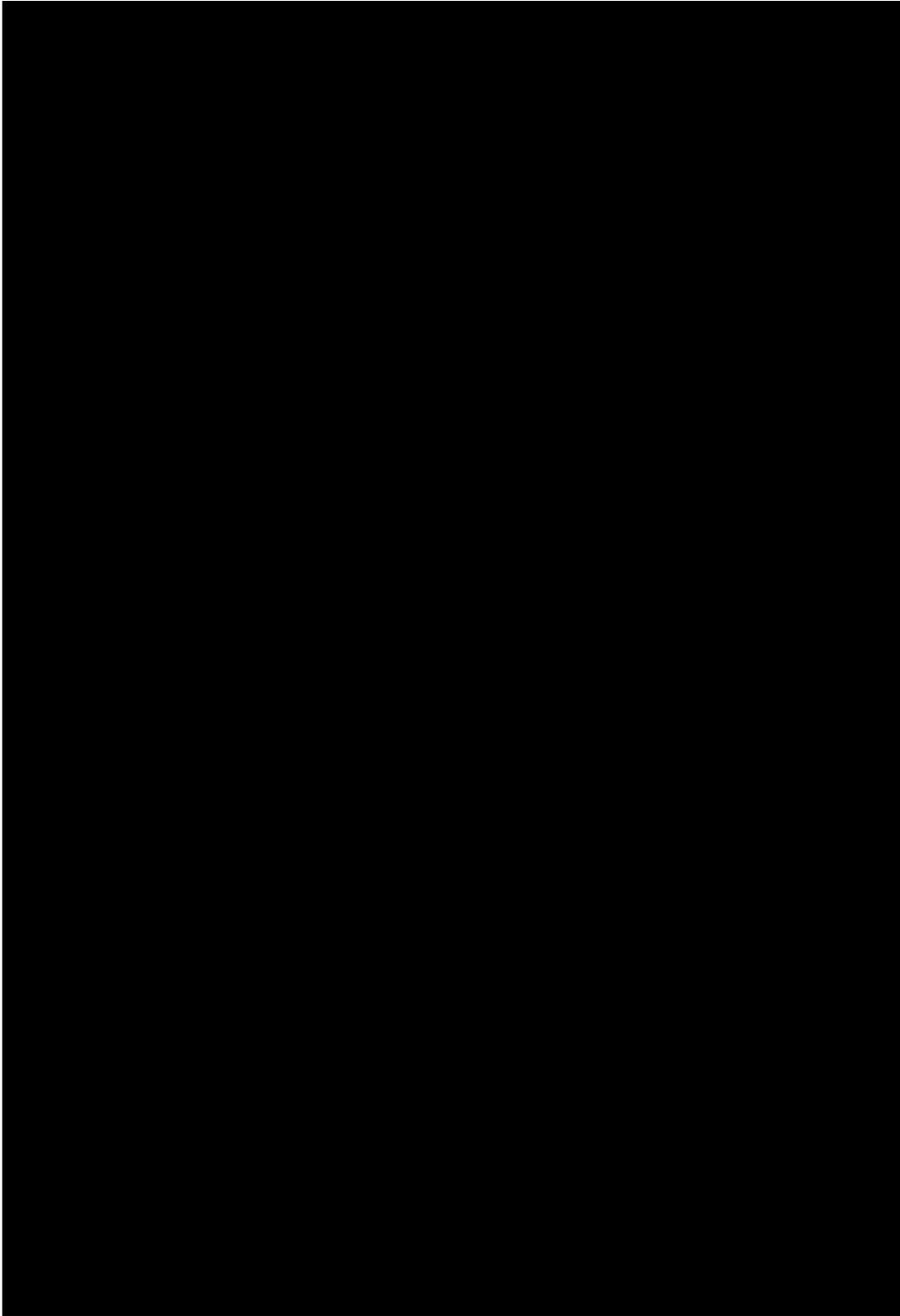


Fig. 13. Léon Bakst, *Schéhérazade* costume design for *Zobéide*, 1910.

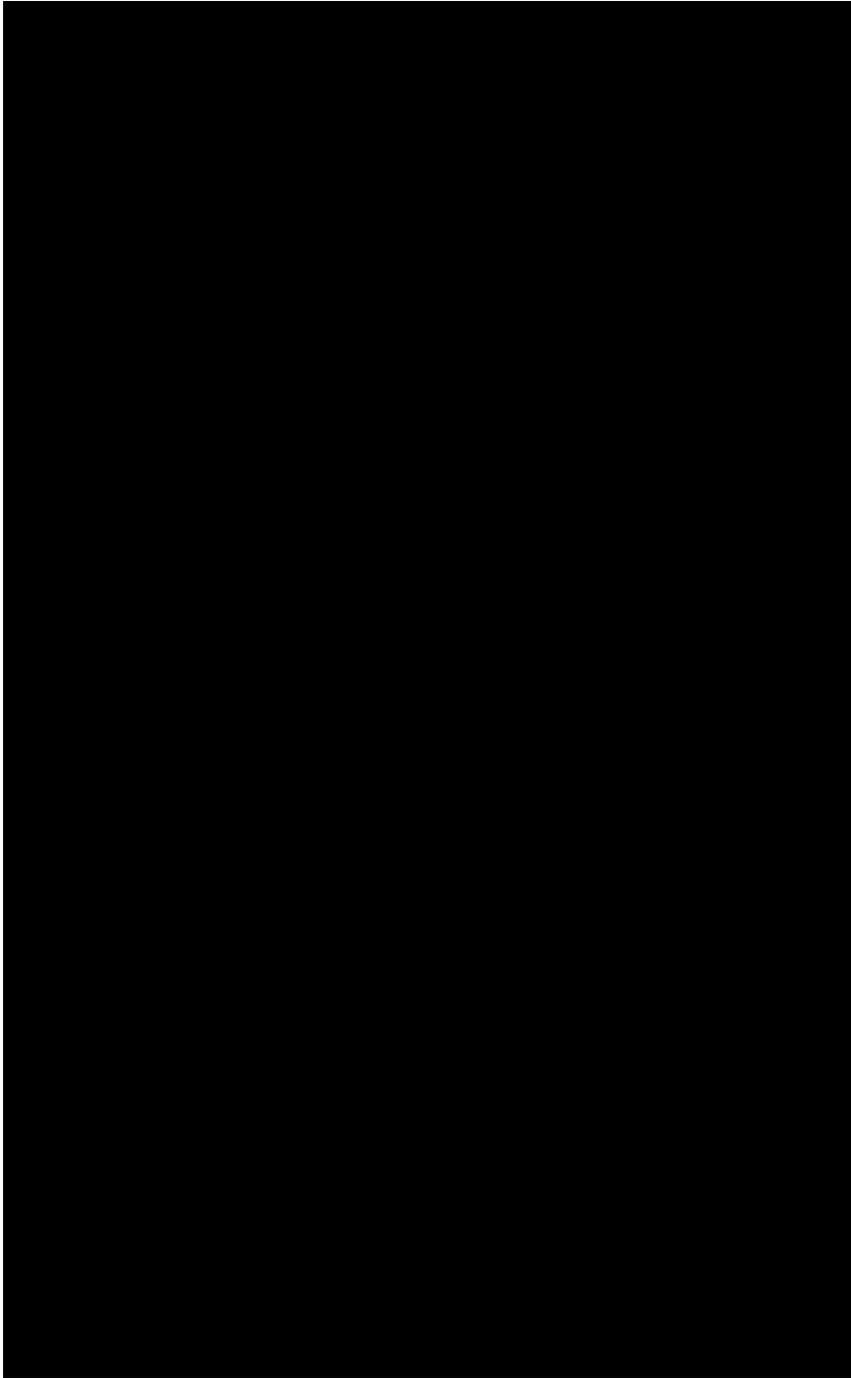


Fig. 14. Léon Bakst, *Schéhérazade costume illustration for Golden Slave*, 1910.

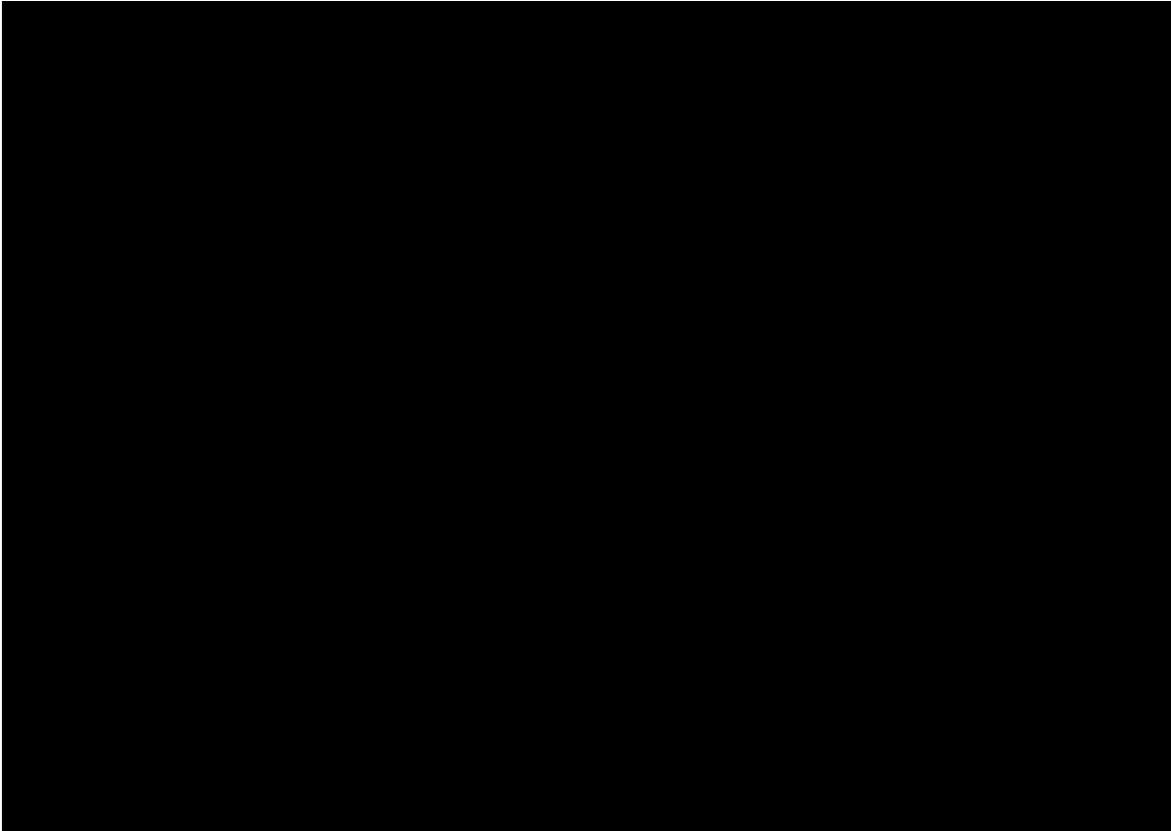


Fig. 15. Léon Bakst, *Schéhérazaïde set design*, 1910. Watercolor, Metallic paint, and graphite on paper. Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio.

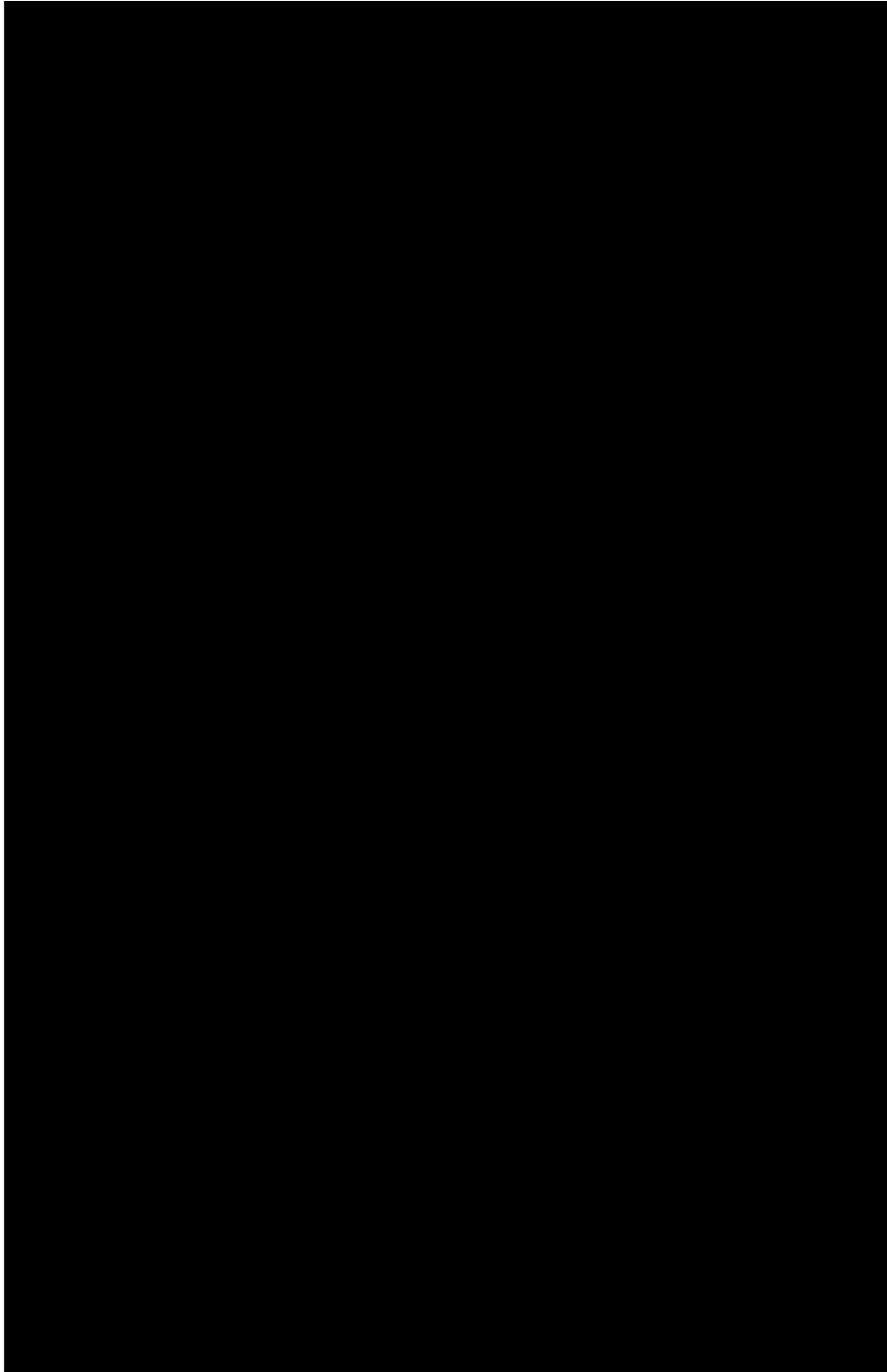


Fig. 16. Michel Fokine and Tamara Karsavina, *Firebird*, costumes by Léon Bakst, 1910.

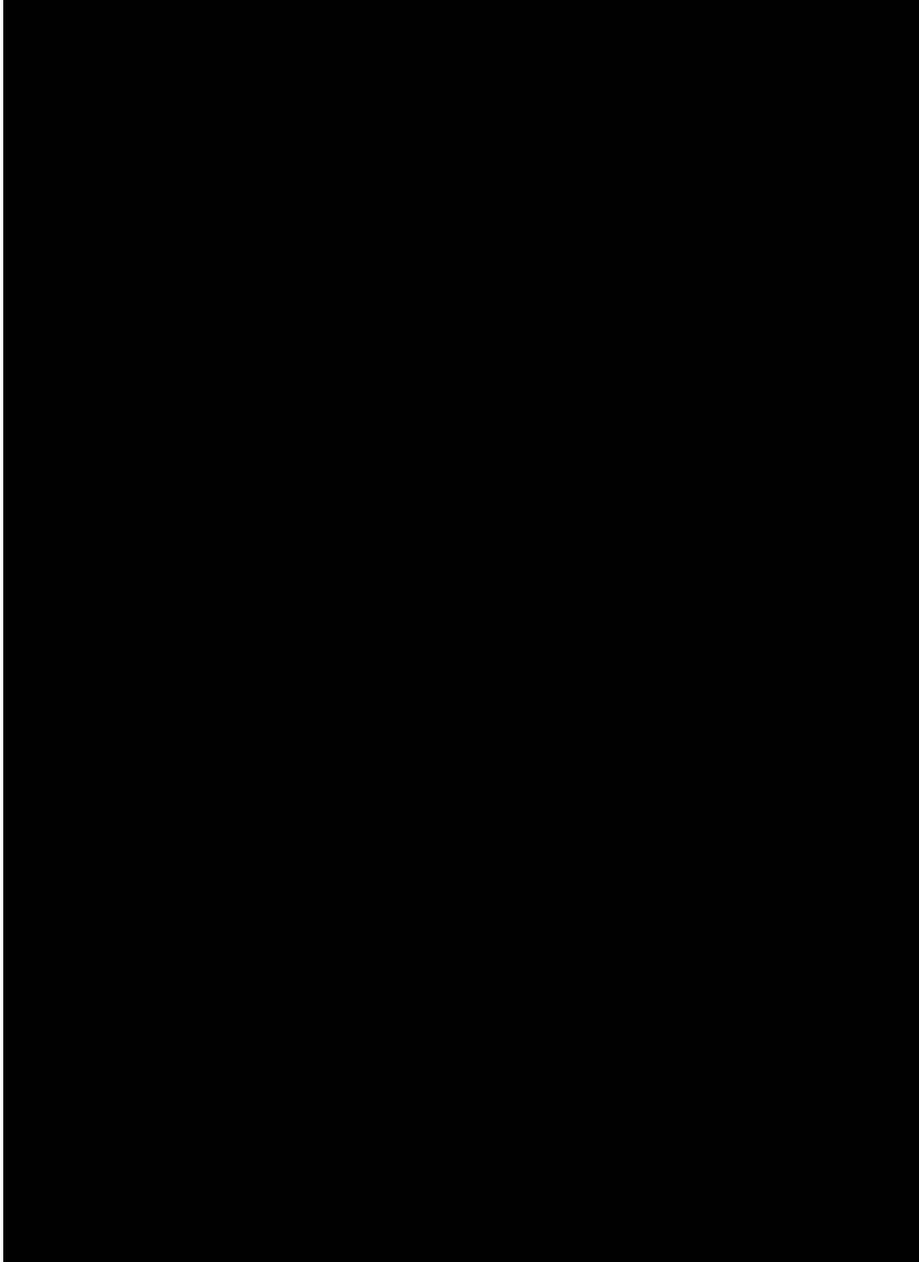


Fig. 17. Leon Bakst, *Firebird costume design*, 1910.

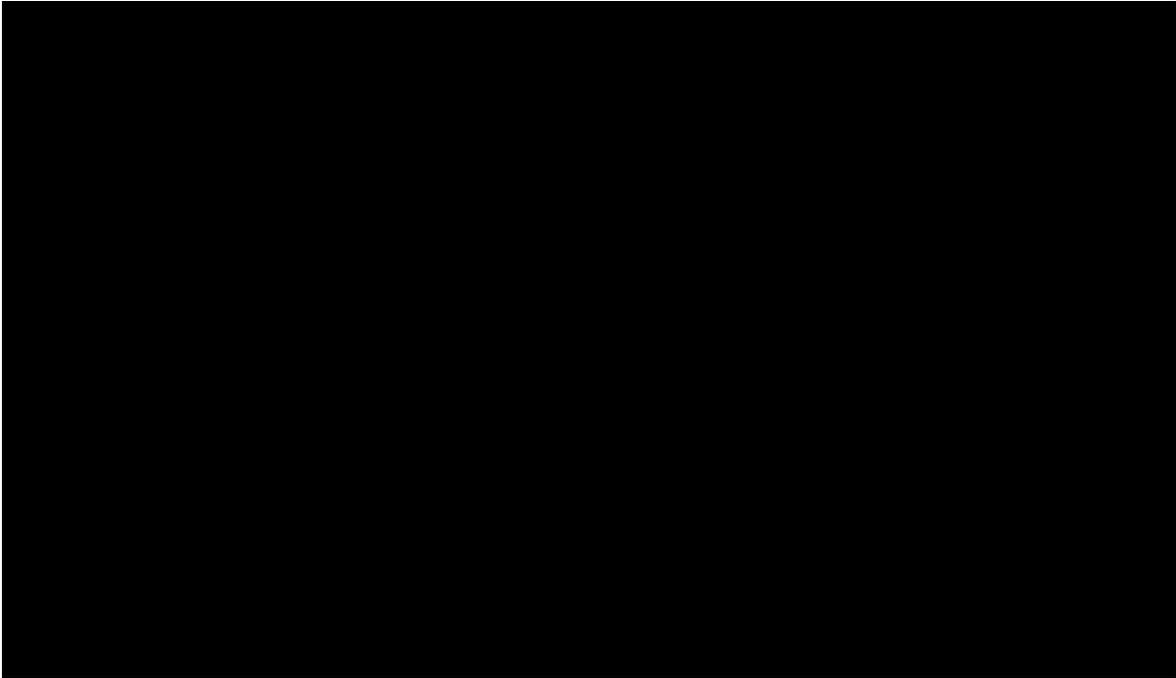


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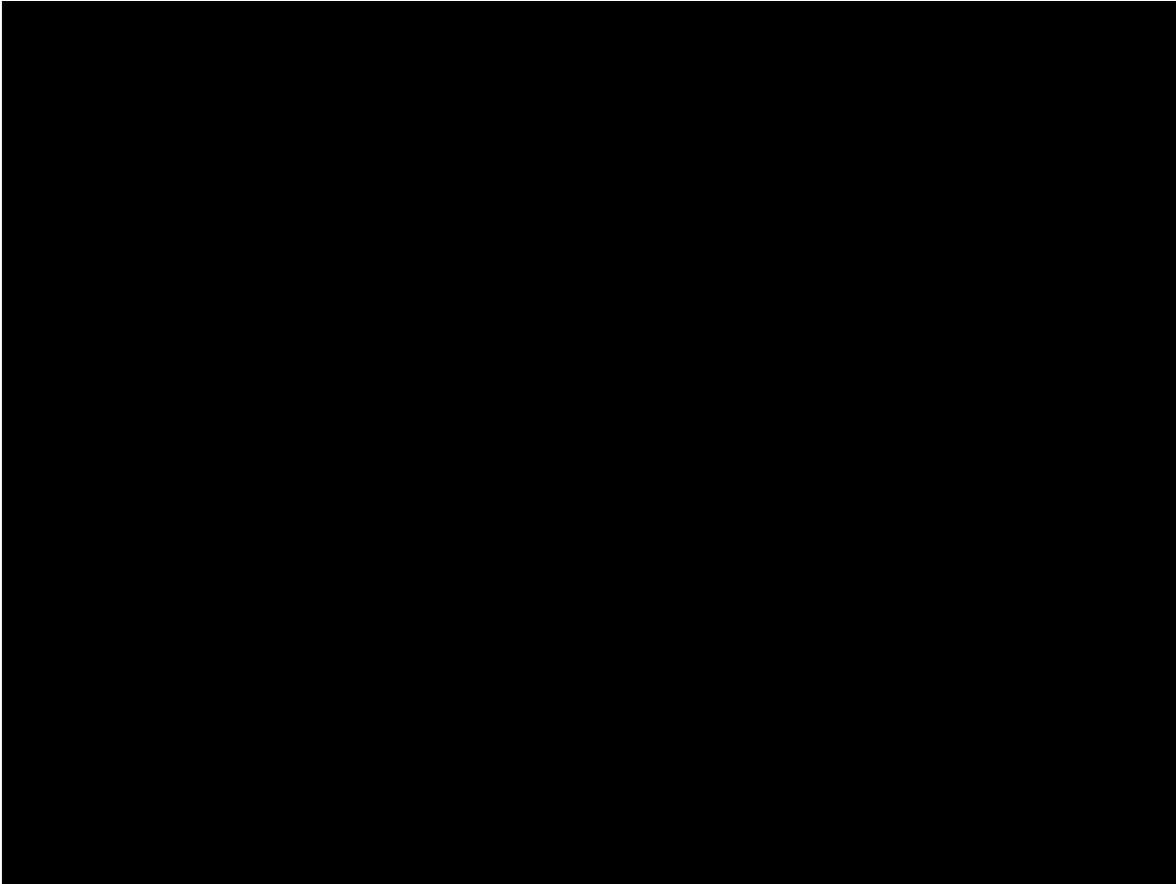


Fig. 19. Il museo di Ferrante Imperato, example of ethnographic collections.



Fig. 20. Maurice de Vlaminck, *Bathers*, 1907. Oil on canvas.

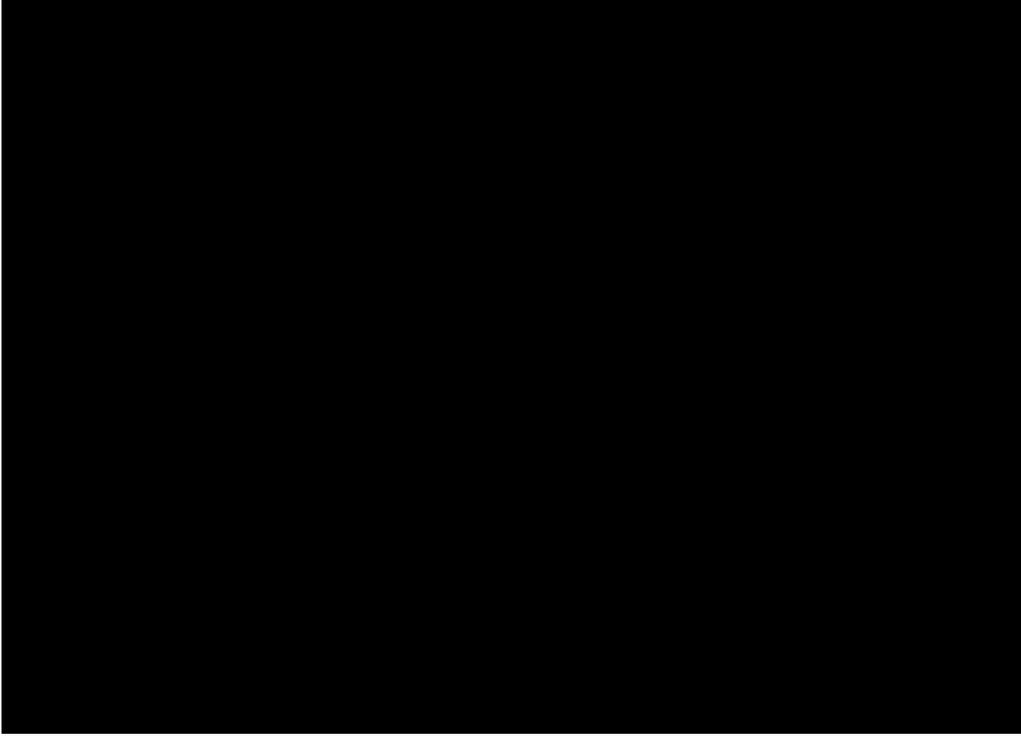


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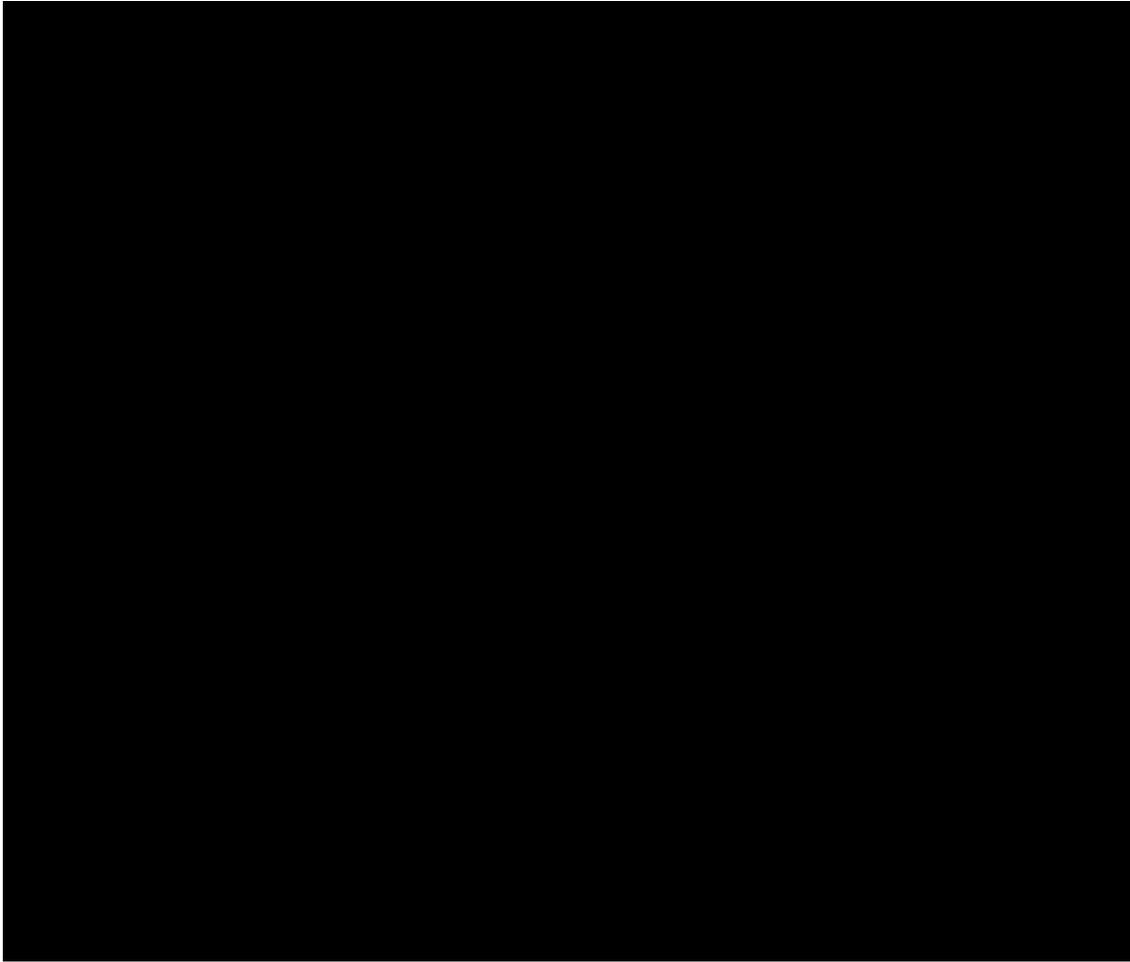


Fig. 22. Ballets Russes, *The Rite of Spring*: choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky, 1913.

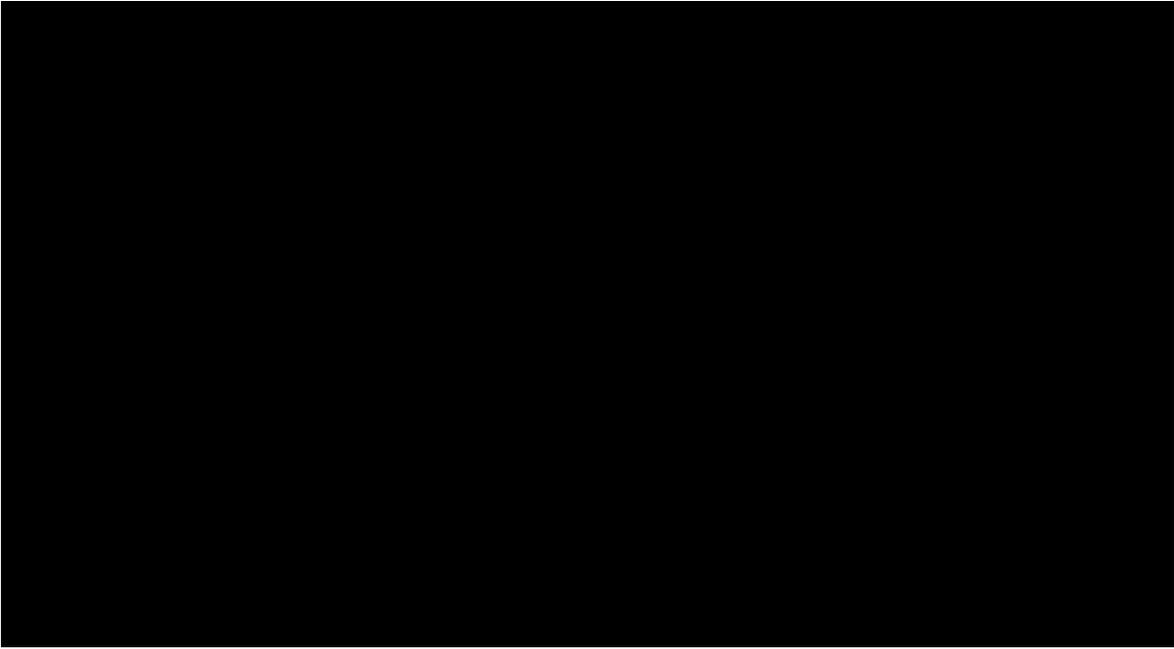


Fig. 23. Joffrey Ballet, *Reproduction of The Rite of Spring*, 1987.

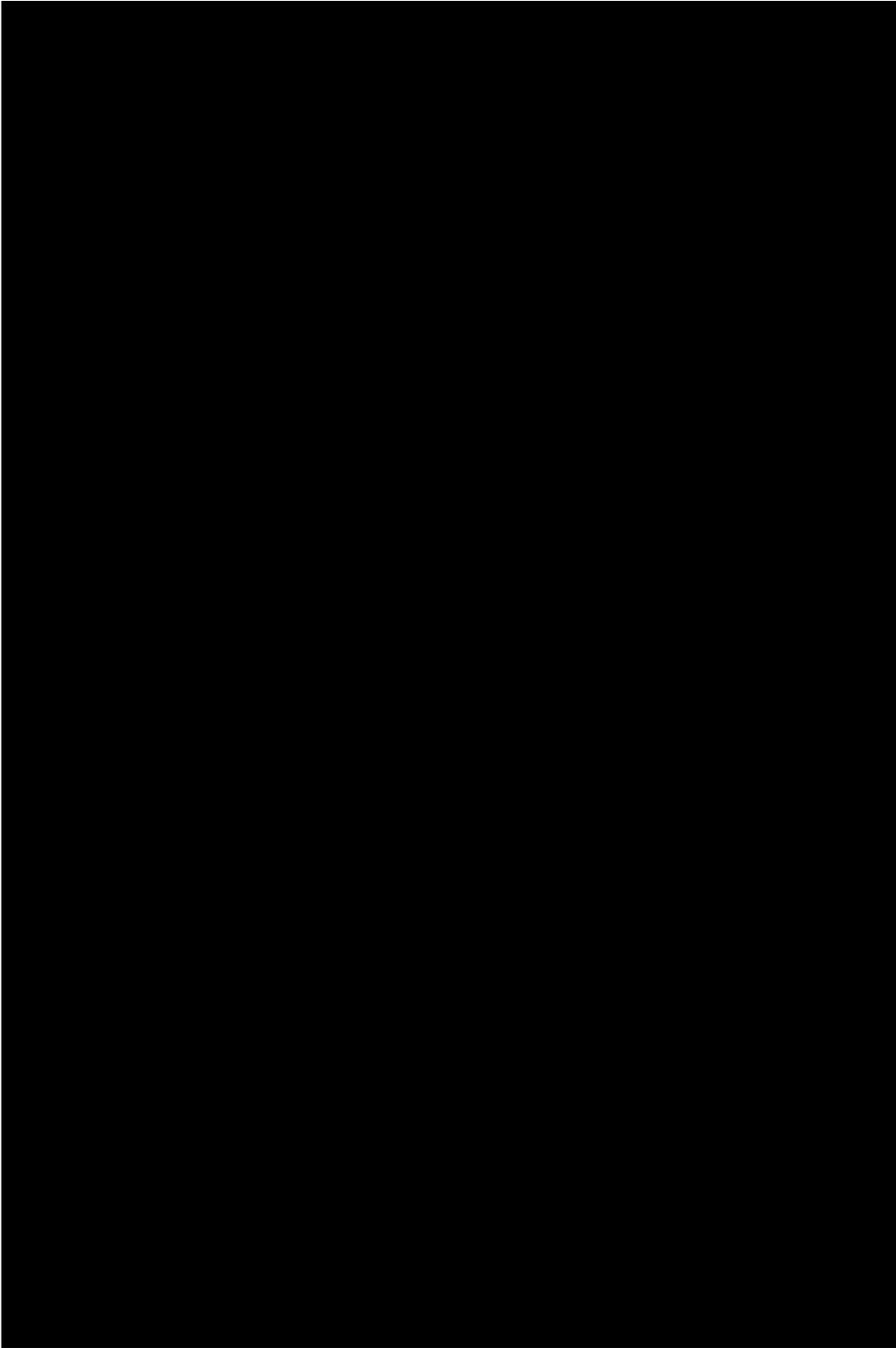


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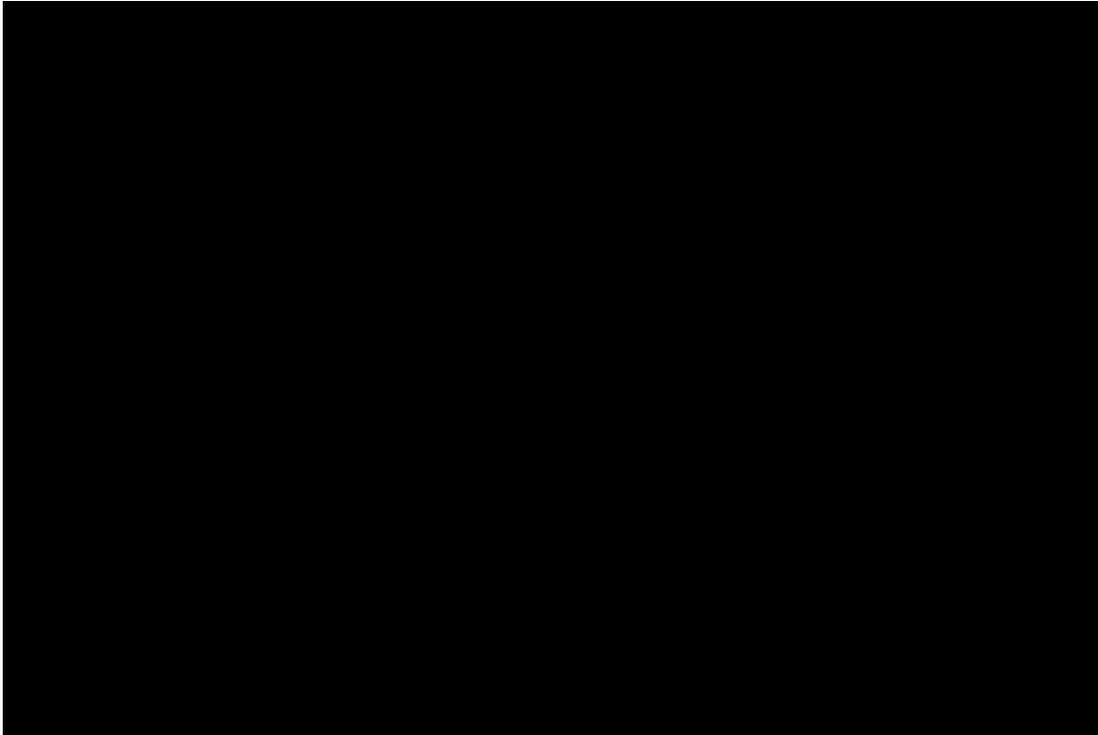


Fig. 25. Nikolai Roerich, *Adoration of the Earth set design*, 1913. Tempera on cardboard. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

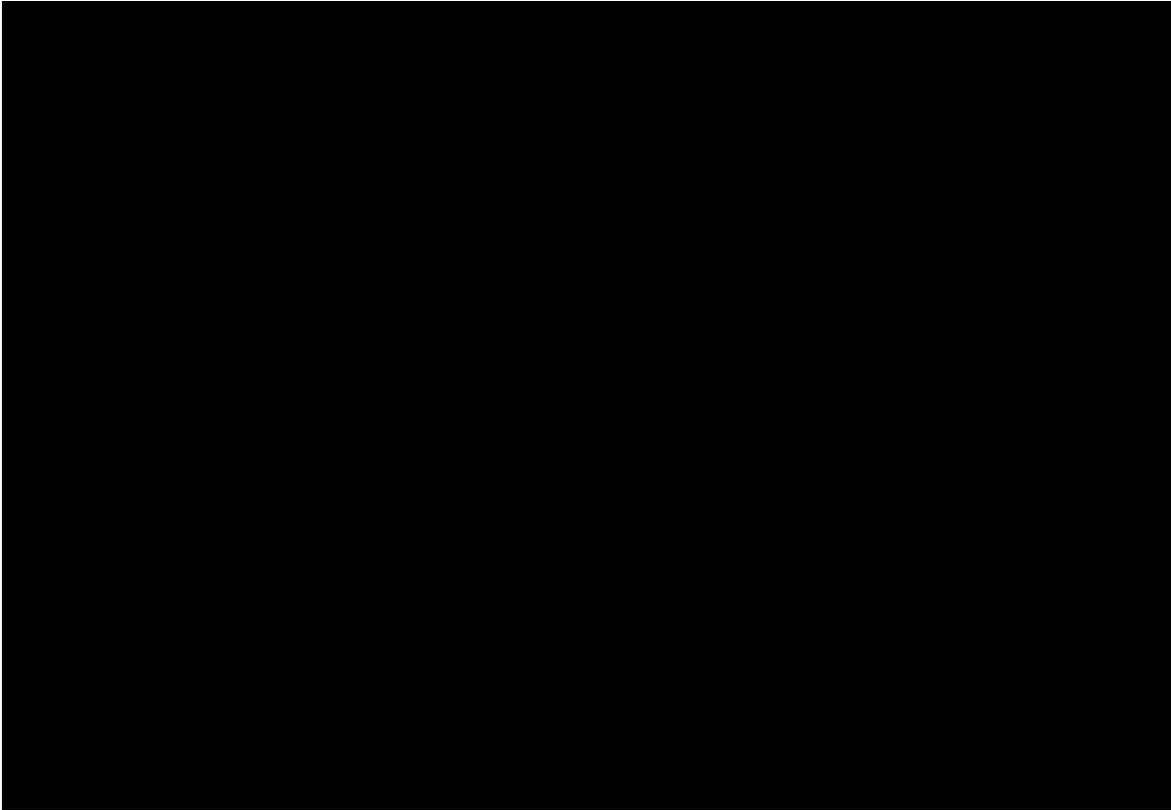


Fig. 26. Nikolai Roerich, *The Sacrifice*, 1913.

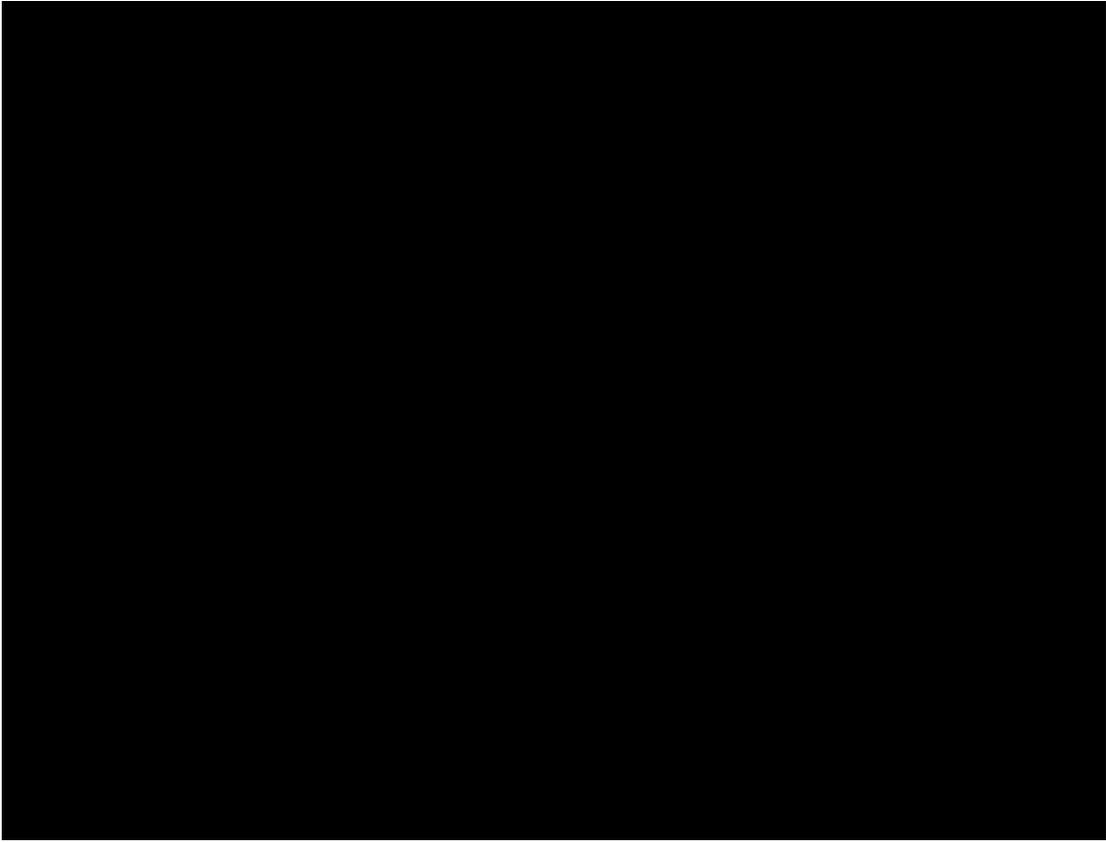


Fig. 27. Paul Gauguin, *Tahitian Landscape*, 1891. Oil on canvas. The Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis.

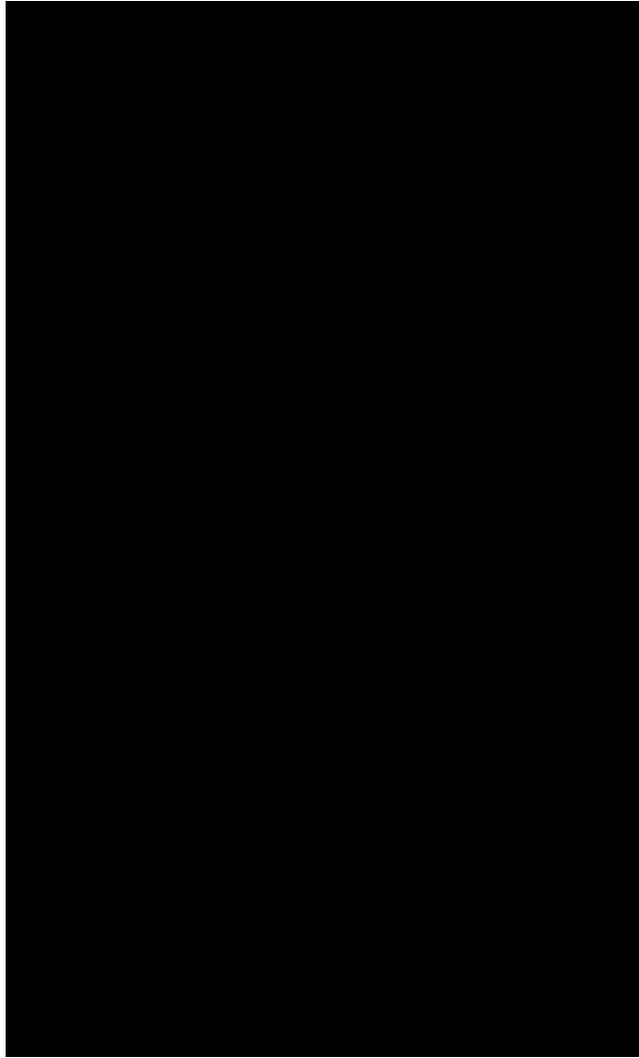


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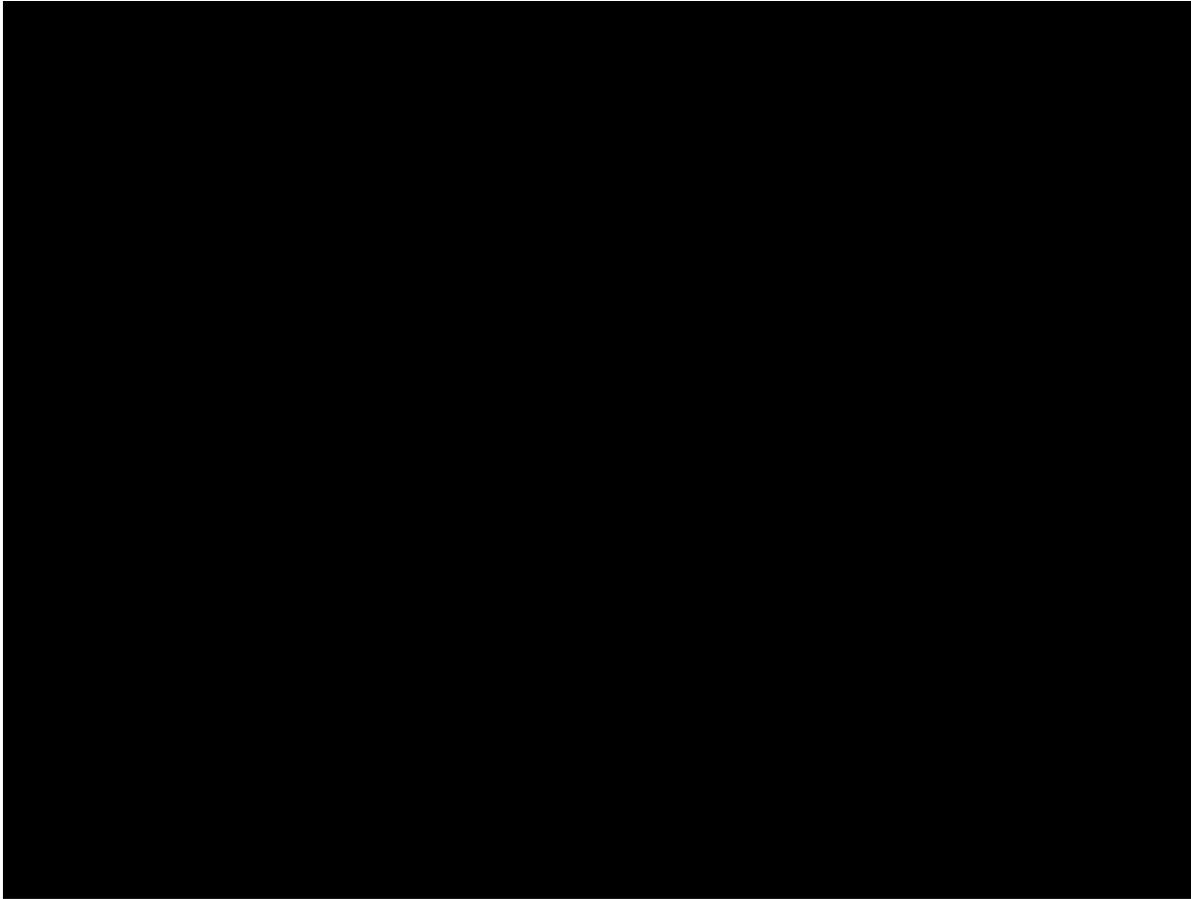


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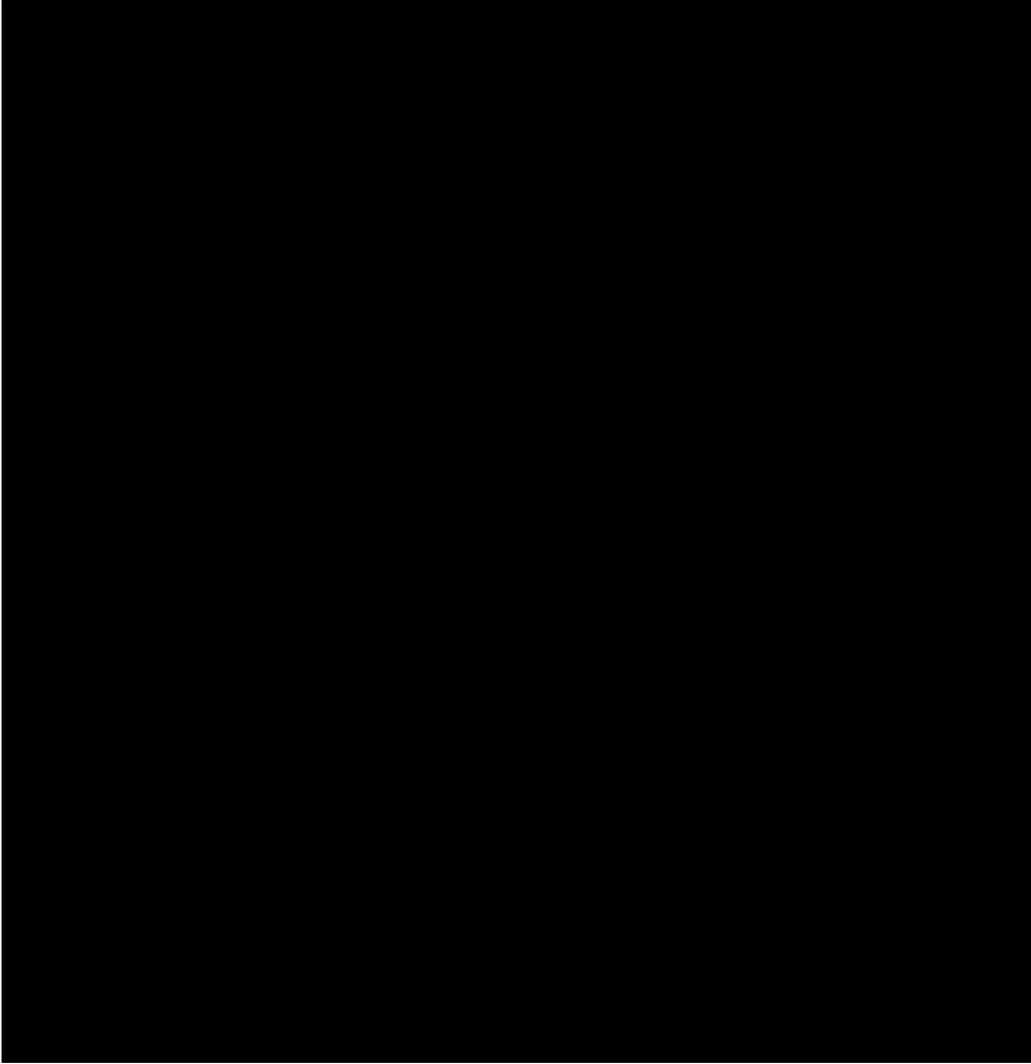


Fig. 30. Pablo Picasso, *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.